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THE OLD WEST

# THE EXPRESSMEN

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New

By the Editors of

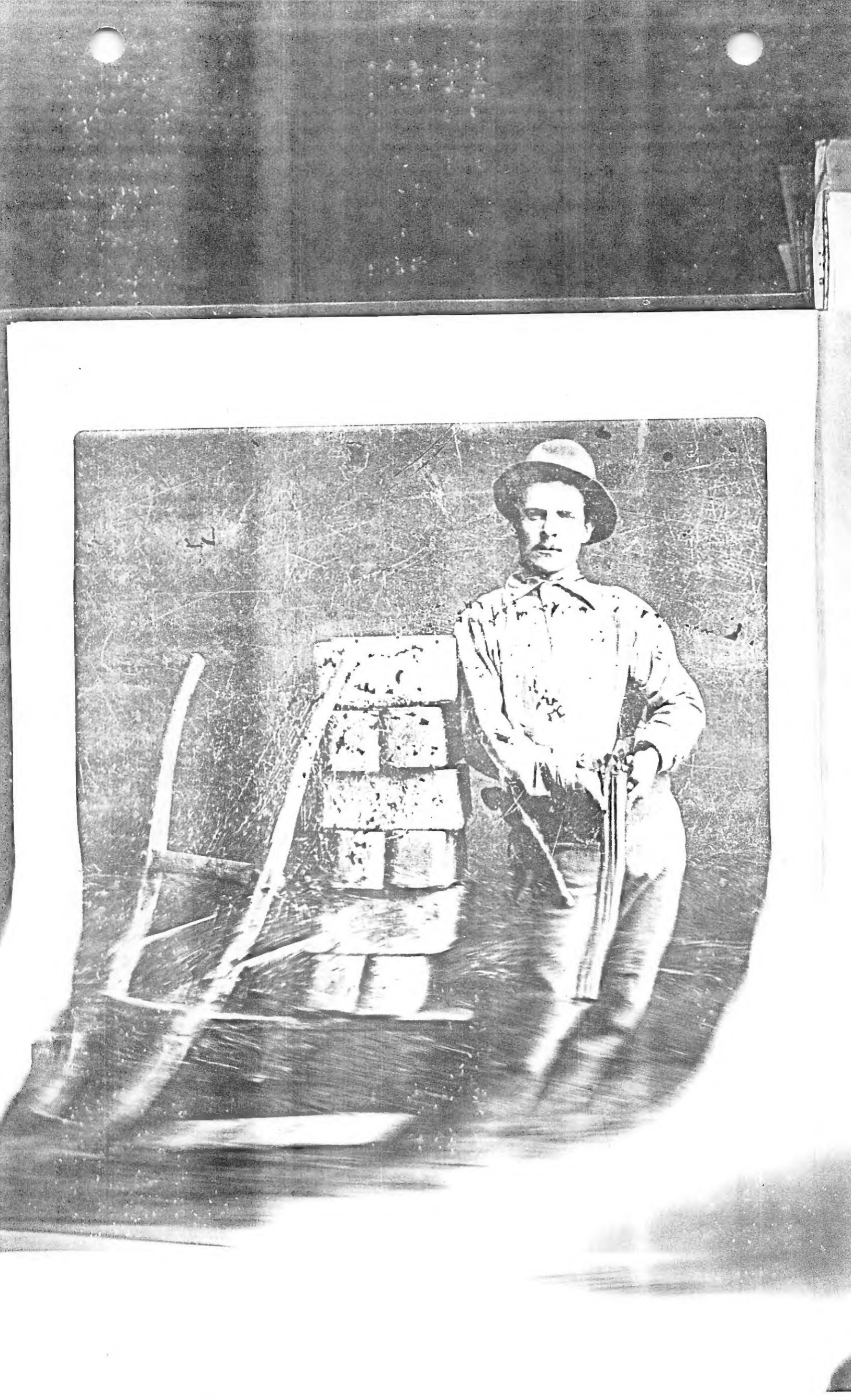
TIME-LIFE BOOKS

with text by

David Nevin

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TIME-LIFE BOOKS / ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA









# 1 | A continent's lengthening lifelines





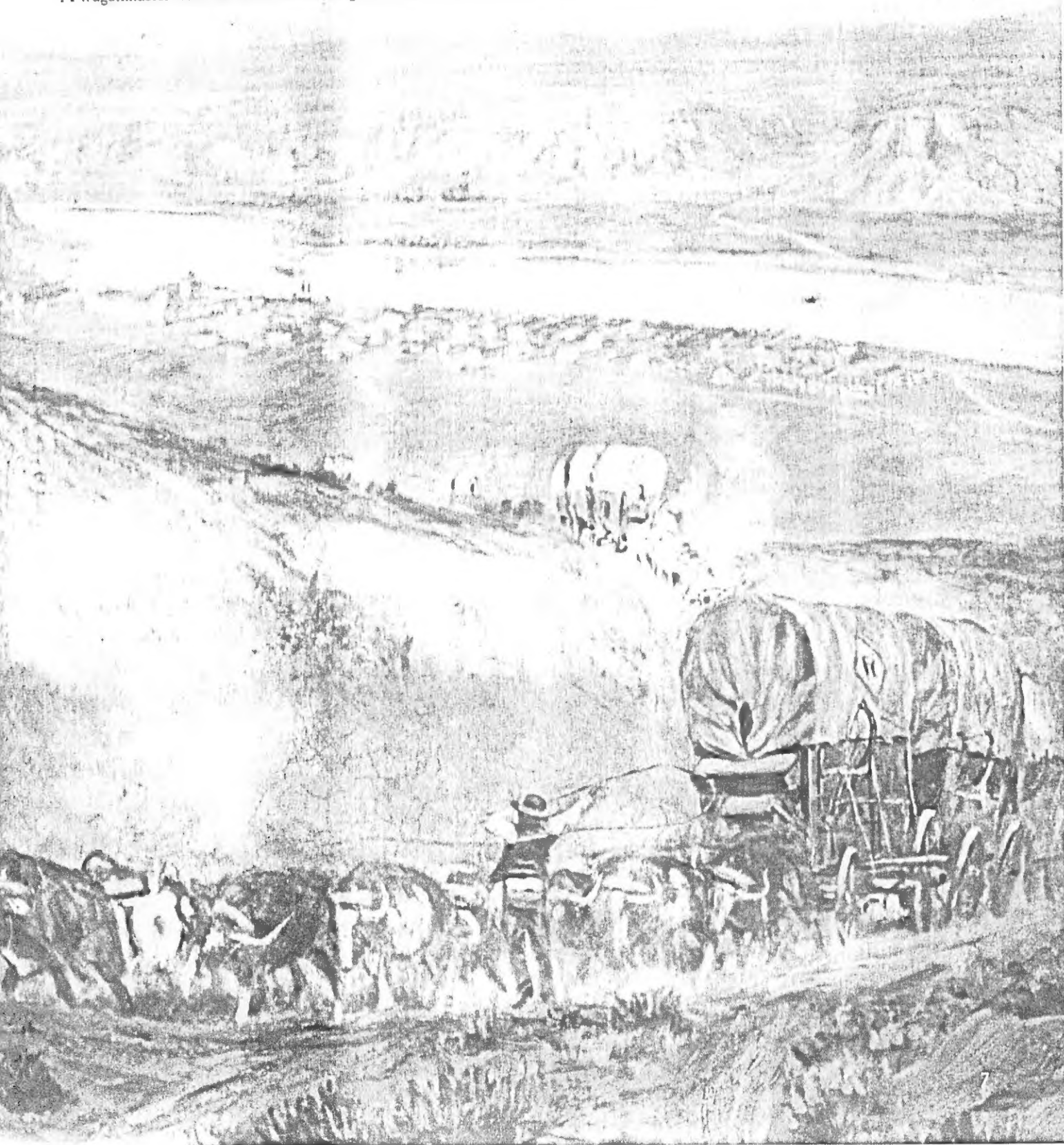
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When President James Buchanan predicted in 1858 that the country would someday be bound east and west "by a chain of Americans which can never be broken," the links were already being forged by an army of entrepreneurs known as the expressmen. Their freight

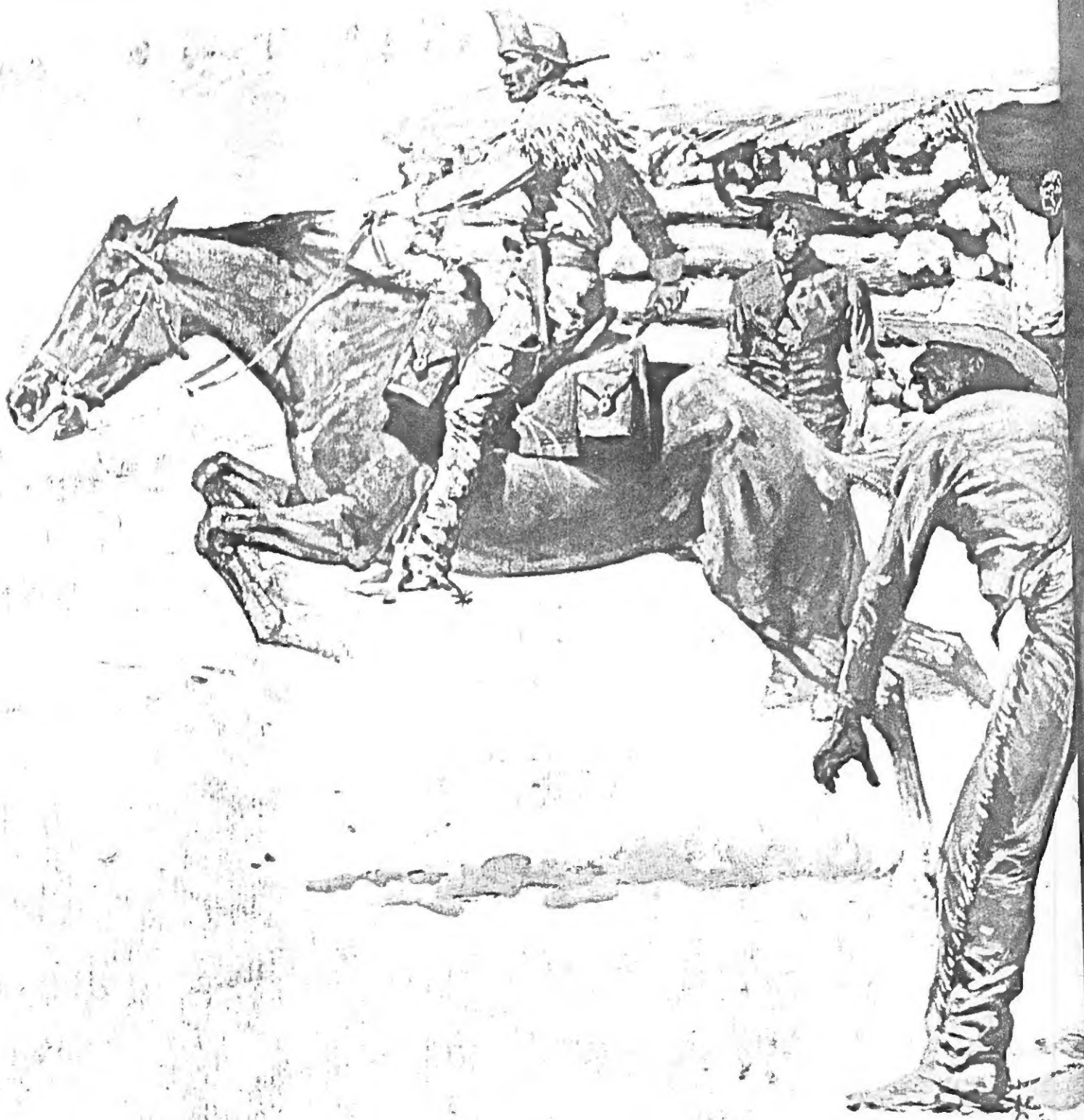
and stagecoach services moved Eastern goods westward, Western ores eastward, and shuttled people, money and mail both ways. By 1860, Pony Express riders were relaying mail across more than half the country in the amazingly brief time of 10 days. Such la-

bors, celebrated here and on the following pages in paintings by Western artists, were eventually to be supplanted by the railroads and the telegraph. But until then, the expressmen persisted as though the fate of a fledgling civilization rested in their hands—and it did.

A wagonmaster watches his ox-drawn freight caravan roll out of Fort Benton on the Missouri in this scene by Charles Russell.



Mounted on a fresh horse, a Pony Express rider, as painted by Frederic Remington, charges out of a station on the mail route from Missouri to California. Couriers changed horses every dozen miles or so, often tiring out as many as six mounts before passing on the mail to the next relay rider.

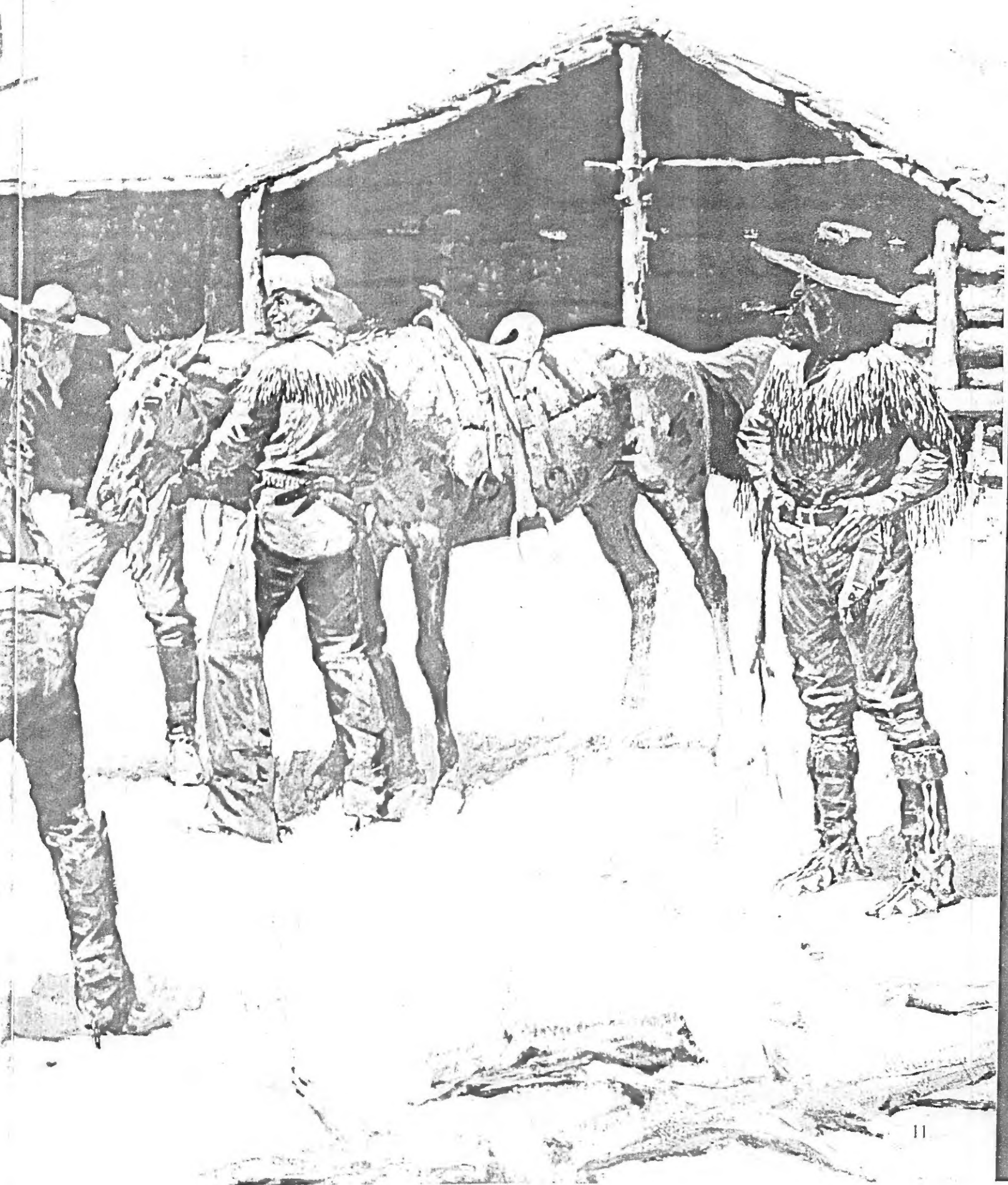




Ireland, which has most restric-  
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 its only a "morning after" pill"  
 at terminates pregnancies in the  
 first 72 hours. Under a 1983 con-  
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# TODD'S EXPRESS AND BANKING OFFICES.

C. A. TODD, Proprietor.

## DAILY EXPRESSES

TO AND FROM

STOCKTON, SONORA, COLUMBIA, MOKELUMNE  
HILL, QUARTZBURGH, AGUA FRIA,  
MARIPOSA, AND

All Parts of the Southern Mines.

## GOLD DUST,

Specie, Valuable Packages, &c., &c.,

RECEIVED AND FORWARDED.

NOTES, ACCOUNTS, &c., COLLECTED, AND

All Business appertaining to an Express,  
PROMPTLY ATTENDED TO.

A STAGE will LEAVE the OFFICE ON THE LEVER AT STOCKTON,  
DAILY, for each of the above named places.

Office in San Francisco, with WELLS, FARGO & CO., in Brick Build-  
ing, No. 114 Montgomery street, between Sacramento and California sts.

C. A. TODD



Delivering letters at up to \$16 apiece, an expressman rides the mining trails in this drawing from prospector Alonzo Delano's *Pen Knife Sketches*. "There's scarcely a gulch he doesn't visit," Delano wrote.



set off with the keg and his mail sack. He delivered the gold to the San Francisco company without misadventure and then paid his visit to the post office.

The scene was bedlam. People stood in lines up to half a mile long waiting to get to a window in the building. The lines barely moved, since each query about a letter required a postal clerk to make a needle-in-a-haystack search through tons of unsorted envelopes.

Todd finally came face to face with the harried postmaster, unburdened himself of his sack of outgoing mail and explained the nature of his subscription list. At that point the postmaster displayed an entrepreneurial in-

stinct of his own. In return for swearing in Todd as a postal clerk and allowing him to sift through the mountain of mail from the East, he levied a kickback of 25 cents for each letter that Todd turned up for a client.

The ex-bookkeeper quickly repaired this small dent in his profits by developing some sidelines. He bought a load of weeks-old New York newspapers for a dollar or two a copy, knowing he could sell them at a healthy markup in the gold camps. Then, to convey his newspapers and mail, he bought a big rowboat for \$300 and looked around for passengers who might be willing to help him bend the oars. Sixteen signed on and plunked down \$16 apiece for the privilege of rowing Todd and his cargo to Stockton. Todd sold the rowboat at a \$200 profit and made his way back to the Mother Lode in the Sierra. The miners not only fell upon their mail but gobbled up the old newspapers—at eight dollars per copy. Todd soon had 2,000 names on his subscription list, and was also earning \$1,000 a day, regularly, for delivering and safeguarding gold dust.

Todd's enterprise was the first regular service of its kind in California or anywhere in the West. But other delivery services followed hard on his heels, for nothing moved easily in California—neither the mail nor provisions for miners nor the miners themselves.

The changeover from Mexican to American rule in 1848, as a result of the U.S. war with Mexico, had wrought little improvement in modes of transportation and communication; they ranged from the somnolent to the hopeless. Under Mexico's regime, California's 20,000 inhabitants had lived chiefly by cattle ranching, and when they traveled at all they went on horseback. The nearest thing to a link between California's towns was El Camino Real—the Royal Route—between San Diego and San Francisco. Despite its grandiose name, it was little more than a meandering bridle path.

From San Francisco north the road situation was even worse. Travelers bound for the Sierra foothills, including the hordes of gold seekers who turned up beginning in 1849, could go part way by boat. Small sailing vessels plied the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers, which led 100 miles or so inland from San Francisco. But beyond the heads of the rivers lay trackless wilderness of steep ridges and narrow gorges.

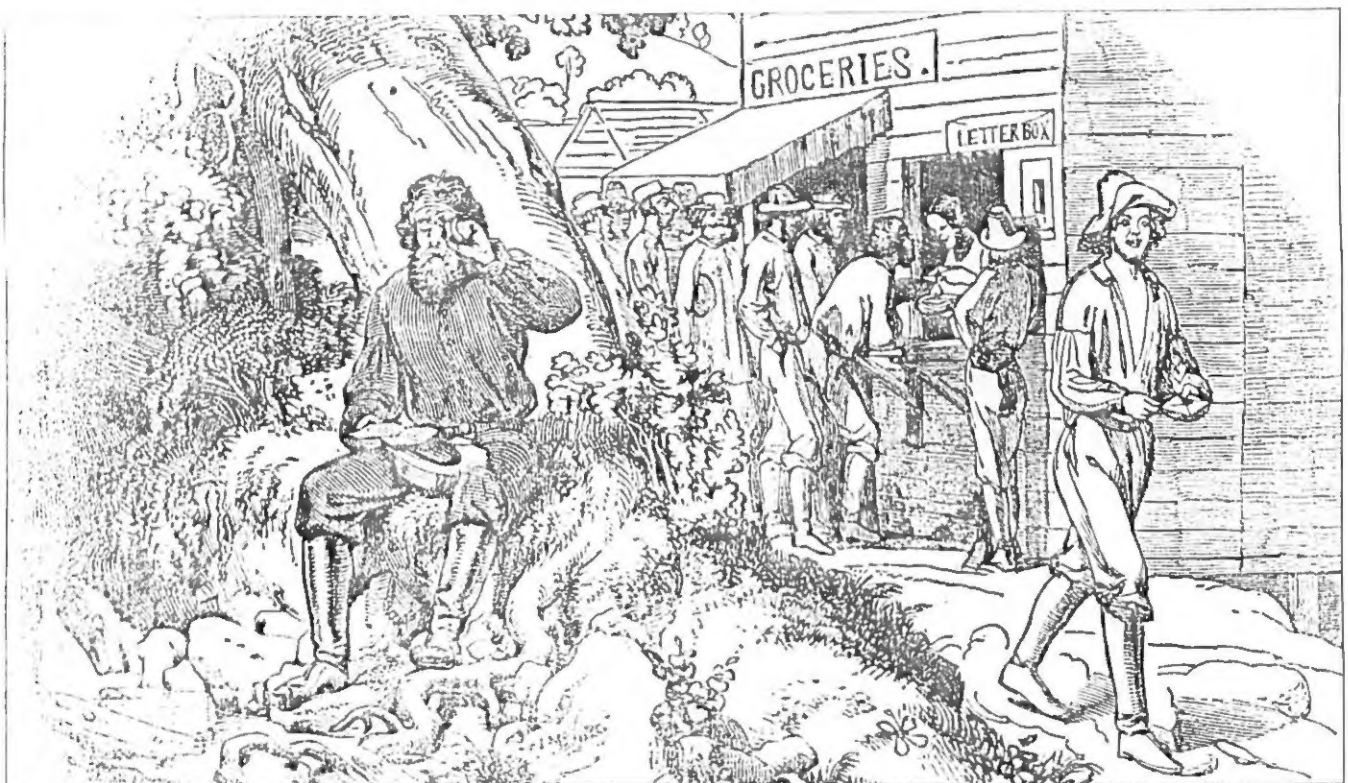
The adventurers who plodded over this terrain often wondered if the instant wealth that was their objective

the testimony will not be taken until Tuesday in the City Center following the regular meeting at 7 p.m. Council members will convene in their regular meeting at 7 p.m.

Billy Be missing, tightly a this morn a few ho Slylock p waits, H



A California miner turns tearful over news from home, while his co-workers line up for their own letters. When mail arrived, the sketchbook author noted, "every pick and shovel is dropped, every pan laid aside."



might not be won at the price of starvation. Few of them were able to carry with them all the supplies required for existence in the outback. Yet their needs were many: not just food, but stoves, pots, guns, tents, clothing, medicines and mining equipment, as well as tobacco, books, and whiskey to fortify body and soul.

Whoever filled these needs had a guarantee of windfall profits, and one of the first to recognize and seize the opportunity was a man named Daniel Dancer. There was nothing new about the means of transport Dancer employed; he simply organized it better. For almost a century the Mexicans and their Spanish overlords had been using trains of sure-footed pack mules to freight goods in and around California. Each mule could carry a load of about 300 pounds, and the manpower requirements were low; one expert muleteer could handle 15 animals. Dancer sent out as many as 150 mules on one journey along the 55-mile freighting line he established from Marysville, on the Feather River, to the gold camp of Downieville. The mules made their way through plunging canyons and mountain creeks carrying everything from sacks of flour to iron safes — and never

lost a load. The delivery charges, figured at the modest rate of five cents per pound of cargo, brought in more than \$2,000 per trip — a return even Alexander Todd would have considered worthy.

While Dancer hauled freight and Todd hauled mail, another transplanted Easterner detected his golden opportunity in hauling people. It occurred to James Birch, soon after he arrived in Sacramento in August 1849, that people would jump at the chance to go from place to place in a vehicle drawn by mules or horses rather than in relative discomfort astride an animal. At home in Rhode Island, Birch had worked as a stable hand for a Providence-based stagecoach line. He now decided to forget about gold seeking and put his staging know-how to use. At the time he was just 21, bursting with energy and possessed of a powerful incentive. He hoped to amass a fortune that would send him back East in triumph to claim the hand of his ex-employer's pretty step-sister, Julia Chace, with whom he had fallen in love.

In lieu of a coach, Birch purchased a battered ranch wagon and nailed boards across the top to serve as seats for some two dozen passengers; his team consisted

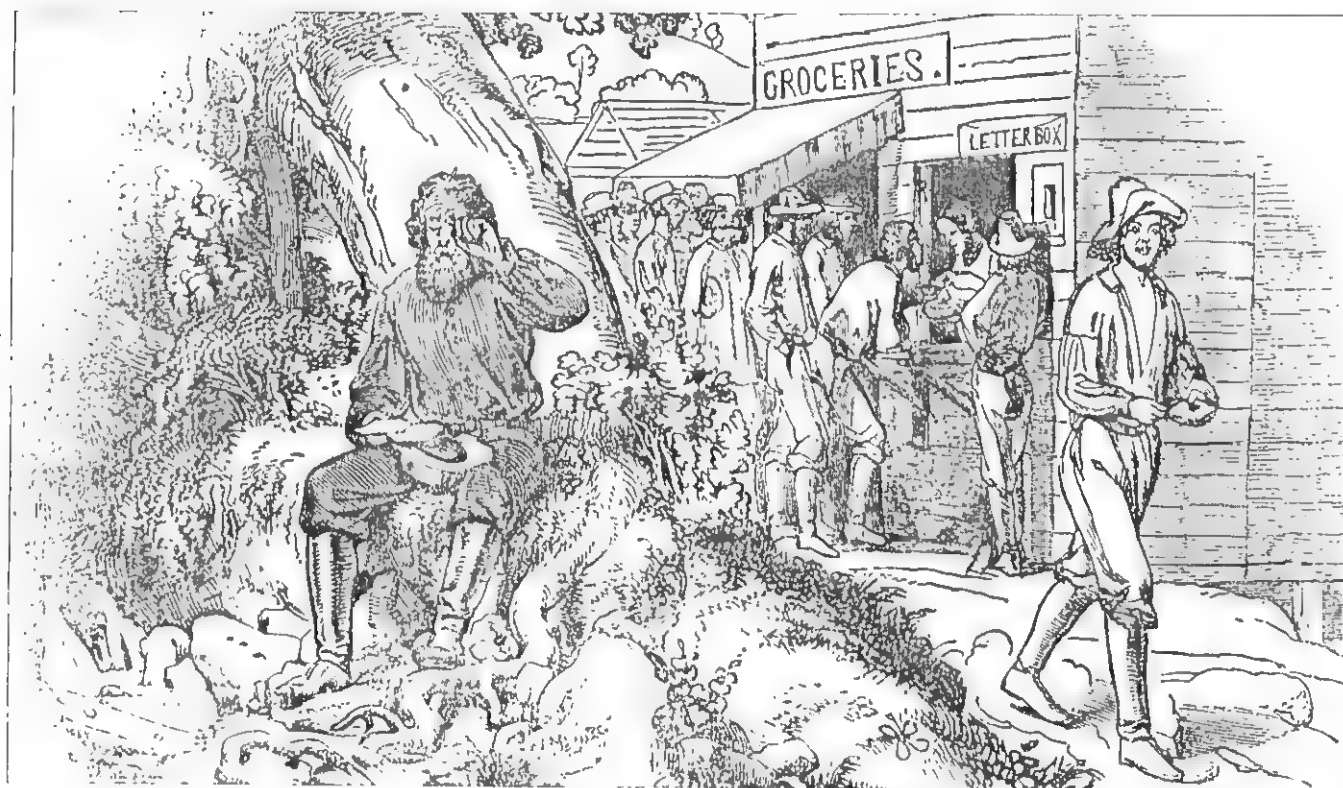


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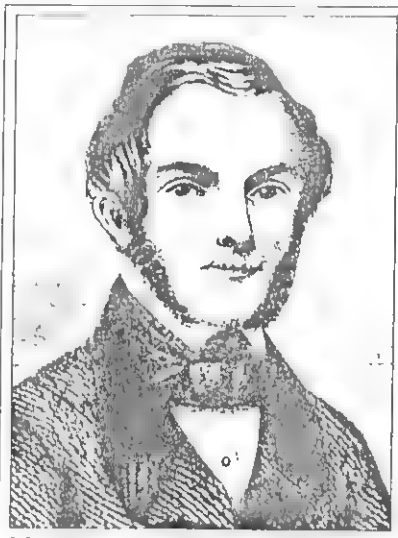
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## A booming business that began in a carpetbag

A decade before the California gold rush made it essential to find a speedy means of getting the precious dust to secure repositories, the basic idea of an express service was successfully tested back East. That first company—founded by William Harnden, a former railroad conductor—had great advantages over the express organizations later set up in the West: its messengers were not required to traverse hazardous, near-wilderness routes, and they could travel by rail and boat rather than by horse or stagecoach. Still, Harnden's enterprise—which carried not gold dust but business documents, bank drafts, currency and newspapers between Boston and New York—provided a model for other expressmen to adapt to their own circumstances.

At the time Harnden launched his business in 1839, the accepted means of shipping parcels between cities was to ask a traveler to carry them as a



Early expressman William Harnden

favor. Stagecoach drivers and steamboat captains often obligingly stuffed a couple of packages into odd cargo spaces. Sometimes even bank notes were brought to train stations to be entrusted to anybody with an honest

face who was heading to the appropriate destination.

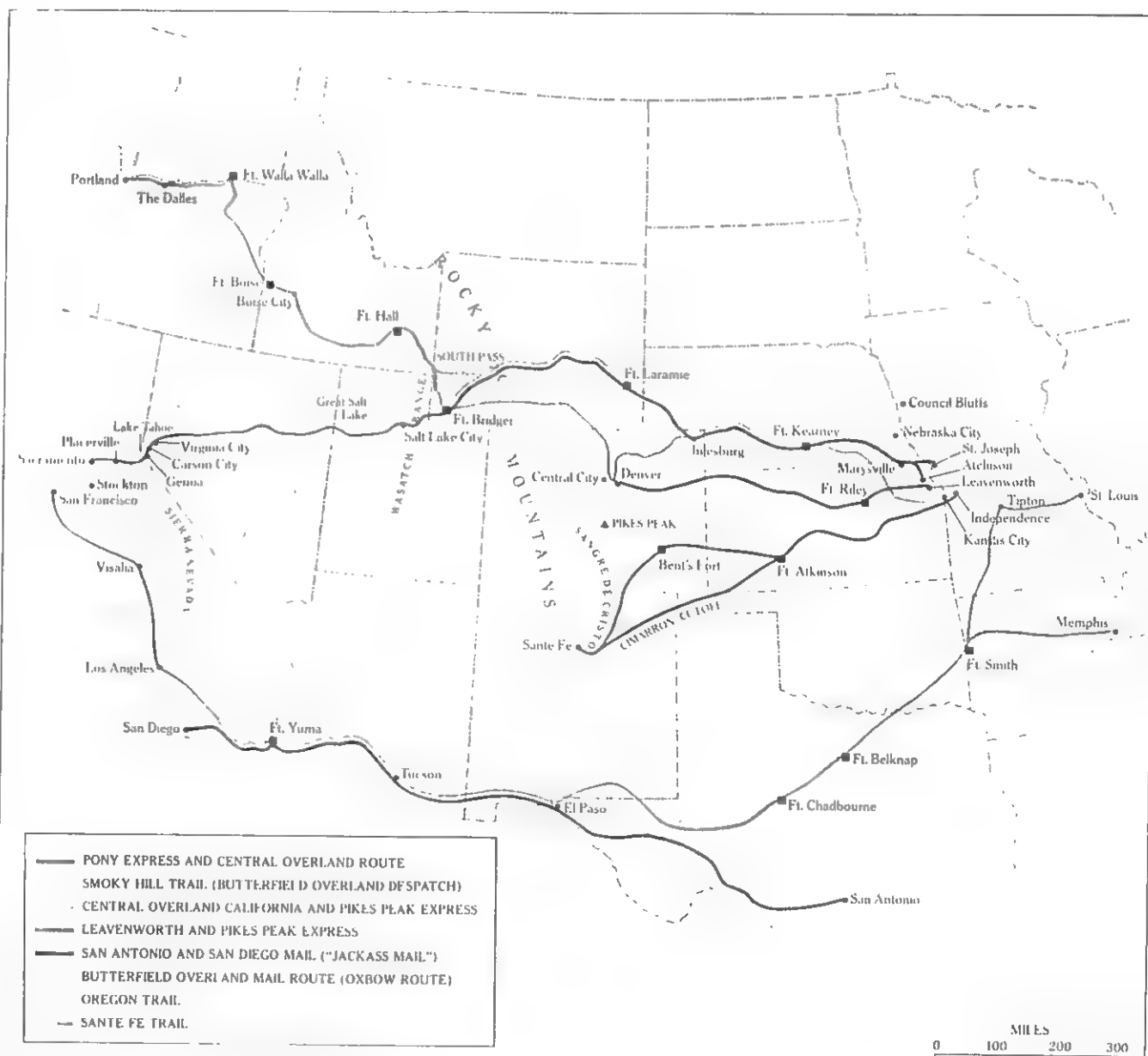
The system worked tolerably well and cost nothing. But Harnden reasoned that his scheme was worth a fee—from a few cents to a few dollars, depending on the shipment's value—for improved security and regular deliveries four times each week. He launched his service personally, toting a carpetbag packed with valuables by train from Boston to Providence and thence by steamboat to New York.

By 1841, he had offices in Philadelphia, Albany, London and Paris. But when an employee named Henry Wells suggested extending the service westward to Chicago and perhaps beyond, Harnden sputtered, "Do it on your own account." Death at the age of 33 from tuberculosis and overwork prevented him from seeing Wells and a partner, William G. Fargo, turn that challenge to lucrative account indeed.



Merchants and delivery boys with New York bound parcels enlist the services of Harnden's first express depot, opened in Boston in 1840.



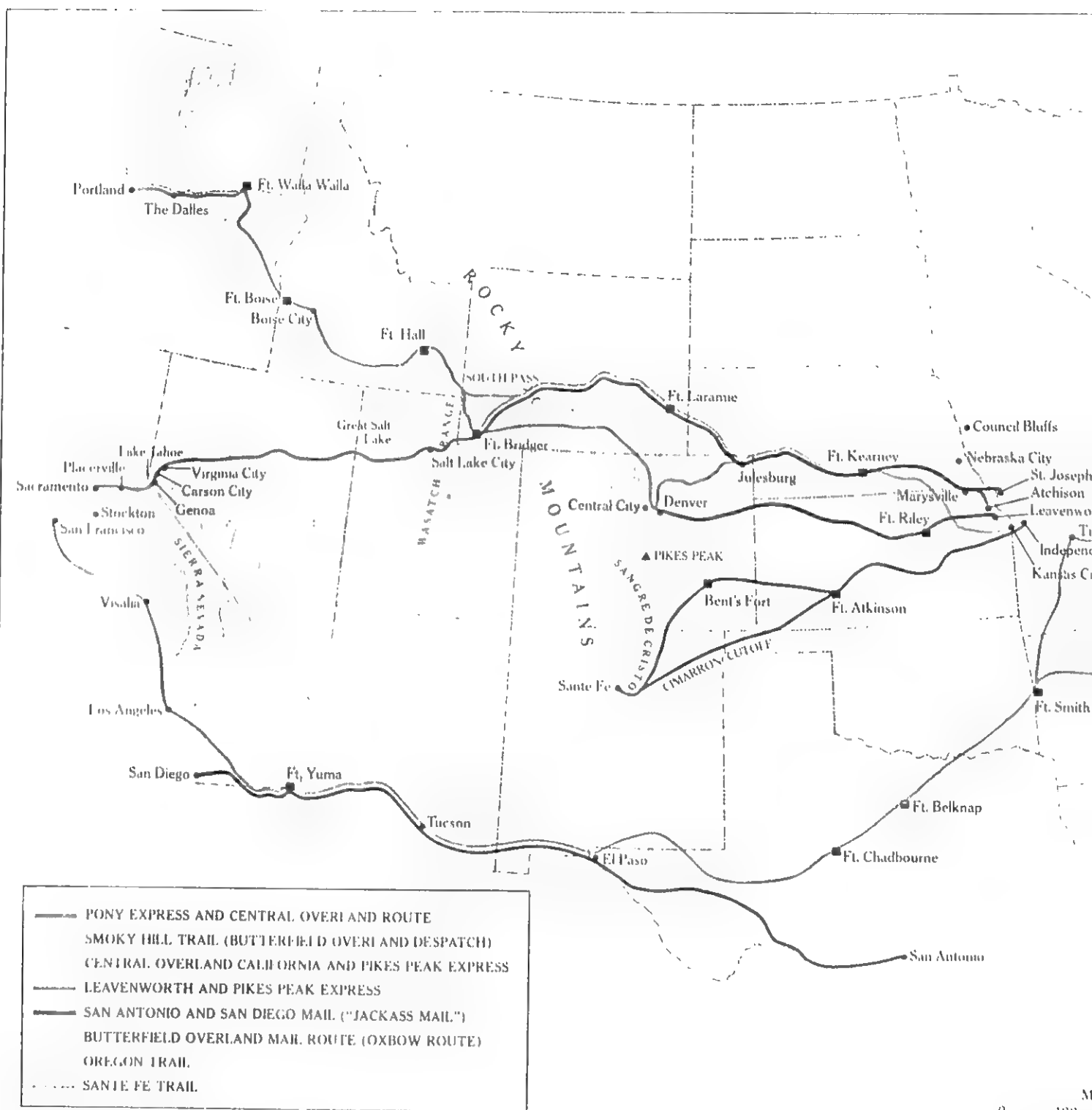


### RIVAL ROUTES ACROSS THE WEST

As a rule, the routes that served as major express conduits to the West for mail, freight and passenger traffic grew naturally from paths blazed through the wilderness by the mules and wagons of pioneers and traders. The earliest, the Santa Fe Trail, came into use in 1821. But the great bulk of Western traffic converged on the Oregon Trail, opened by fur traders' wagons in 1830, and on its branches to the Great Salt Lake Valley and California. This central route was used by freight trains from the 1840s on, by the riders of the Pony Express in 1860

and 1861, and by stagecoaches both before and after that time.

The central route's chief rival, and the only one not dictated by the path of population or commerce, was the Oxbow Route, so-called because of the circuitous direction it took to satisfy the regional interests of Southerners in Congress. This route, opened in 1858, was followed part of the way by the "Jackass Mail" (the name suggested what critics thought of it) and by John Butterfield's stagecoach line over its entire length, until the great arc was interdicted on the eve of the Civil War.



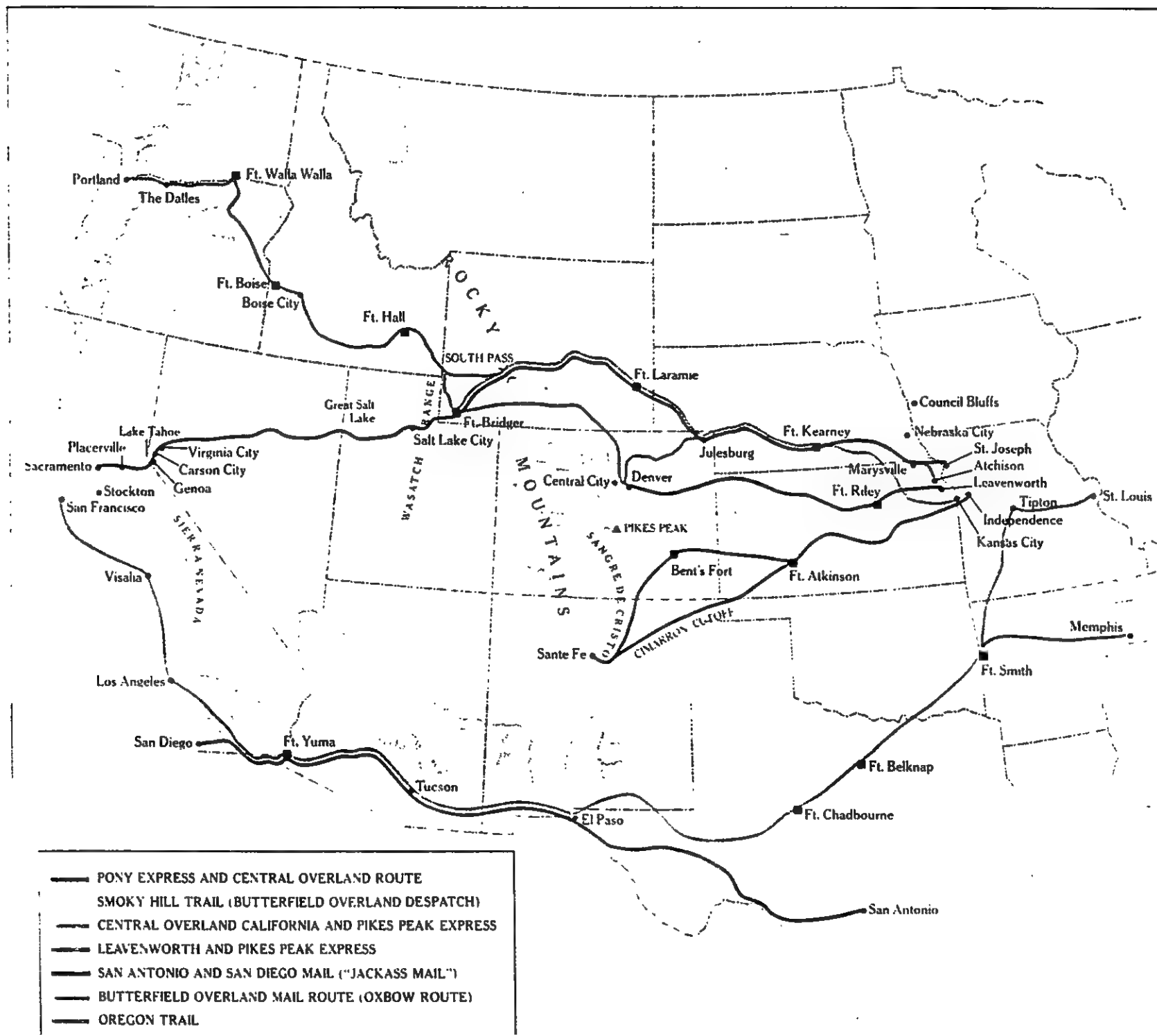
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The East was well knit by 1850  
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mercial transactions except by means  
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of the Isthmus were rarely predictable

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his own wagon — at his own risk.

Nor was there anything remotel

An encounter with hostile Indians was a recurrent peril of the 800-mile Santa Fe Trail. But travelers who made a show of force, as in the case of this 1831 wagon caravan, usually got through unmolested.



in wagons, each of which could hold six times the load a pack horse could carry. But he foresaw one major obstacle: he did not think wagons could get through the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. And so in 1822, as he headed back to Santa Fe, Becknell providently explored a route that skirted the mountains, going across 60 miles of parched desert between the Arkansas and Cimarron rivers. In succeeding years, with other traders, he took his wagons through the Cimarron Cutoff, as it came to be known. Soon afterward the Sangre de Cristo Mountains were proved hospitable to wagon travel after all, by way of the Raton Pass; though this route took longer, it did not have the water-supply problems of the Cimarron Cutoff, nor the same dangers from the notably belligerent Comanches and Kiowas in the region.

Either route between western Missouri and Santa Fe was feasible, and before long both were bustling with traffic. Following in the wheel ruts of the traders' wagons rumbled the heavier vehicles of freight operators. Freighting became so routine that after the U.S. took the Southwest from Mexico in 1848 and set up a

garrison at Santa Fe, the staggering task of supplying thousands of soldiers with food, firearms, tools and other needs was achieved with comparative ease.

Hundreds of miles to the north, nonmilitary wagon traffic was starting to surge over a route parallel to the Oregon Trail, and leading from South Pass in the Rockies, through the Wasatch mountains and into the Great Salt Lake Valley. This trail, with its final descent from dizzying heights into scorching desert, had been pioneered in 1847 by the Mormons at an immense expenditure of toil and sweat. They had removed obstructing boulders and timber, established ferries across streams and even erected guideposts. No other emigrants had bothered with such matters, but the Mormon vanguard knew that bands of their brethren would be following in their footsteps. Though this alone was reason enough to inspire their labors, other benefits were soon to emerge.

By 1849, some 4,000 members of the sect — safe at last from the harassment and persecution that had driven them westward — lived in the Mormon stronghold of

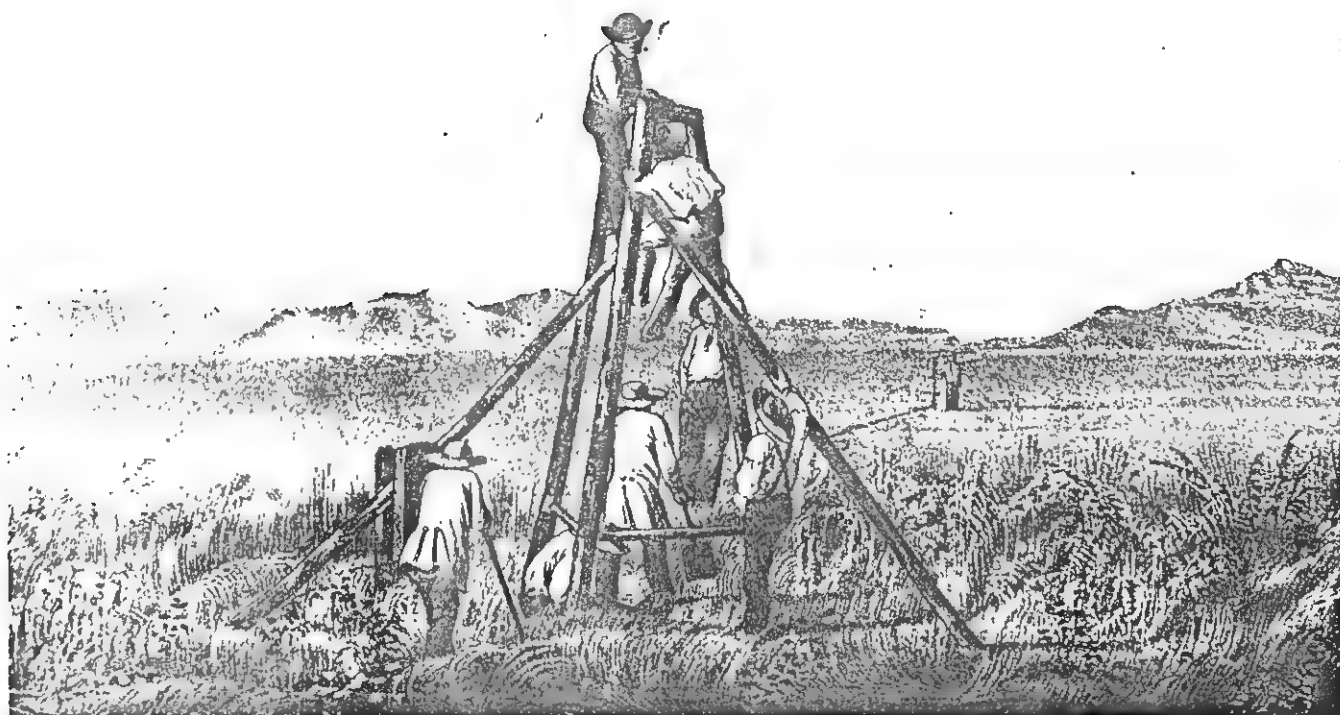


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Surveyors erect a sighting station to map a wagon route around the Great Salt Lake in 1849. The expedition, led by Army engineer Captain Howard Stansbury, cut 61 miles off the old trail to California.



man with a string of mules and a number of helpers.

In November 1851—just six months after the enterprise got underway—Absalom Woodward met a curiously poignant end. He set out from Sacramento for Salt Lake City with four experienced mountain men, all of them on horseback and armed with long-range government rifles. One morning about 70 Indians attacked them at Clover Patch, near the Humboldt River in central Nevada. Woodward and his friends killed several of the attackers and thought they had driven off the rest. That day and nearly all night they traveled on a forced march, and the next morning crossed paths with Chorpenning and his party bringing the mail from Salt Lake City. That was the last that was seen of Woodward and his companions until their bodies were found—four grouped together in death and one, Woodward's, strangely far away. According to information later gathered from other Indians, the attackers, bent on revenging their losses, had followed in pursuit, ignored the Chorpenning party and launched a second assault on their original target along the Humboldt River. Wood-

ward's men were killed and he was mortally wounded. But he escaped on his horse and covered some 150 miles of terrain before slipping from the saddle.

Chorpenning did his best to maintain the delivery schedule on his own, only to run afoul of a winter of especially heavy weather. On one trip in February all of the firm's stock—13 mules and a horse—froze to death in a single night in the Goose Creek Mountains in northern Nevada. Chorpenning and his helpers loaded the mail on their backs and slogged some 200 miles through deep snow to deliver it to Salt Lake City.

Small-scale operators like Chorpenning struggled on heroically with the transcontinental mails until the late 1850s, but their days were numbered. The seeds of William Bayard's idea had begun to sprout. Combining the transport of passengers and mail via transcontinental stage coach now seemed entirely practical; if strings of pack mules made links in a transcontinental chain, stage lines could do even better.

Californians were particularly eager for the change. In May 1856, California's Senator John B. Weller

## Swift couriers who defied the wintry Sierra

In grappling with the assorted adversities of Western weather and terrain, expressmen who specialized in the transport of mail and small parcels tried almost every imaginable mode of transport—even their own slogging feet. But the daunting combination of winter and mountains called for a special kind of resourcefulness.

In the Sierra Nevada, where drifting snow closed passes to horse and foot travel much of the winter, some expressmen got through by wearing Indian snowshoes. This method was too slow to satisfy an enterprising Californian named Fenton Whiting. In the winter of 1858 he hitched some large mongrels to a \$75 sled and launched the West's first dog-team express. Whiting's sledges, which transported up to 600 pounds of packages and mail to miners on each trip over wintry mountain trails, lasted until 1865, when a snowshoe for horses was introduced. Thus shod, horses were hitched to stage-sleighs—stage-coaches that had runners instead of wheels—that replaced the dog express for mid-winter service.

Another unusual express service had been inaugurated earlier in the mining town of Placerville, California. In 1856, after a severe blizzard had closed the road to the Nevada hamlet of Genoa, a hulking Norwegian named John Thompson informed the Placerville postmaster that he knew a way to get the mail through. When this declaration met with frank disbelief, Thompson produced a pair of long skis, whose use he had mastered in his native land. The postmaster decided to give the Norwegian and



Fenton Whiting's dog team darts through a Sierra blizzard in this 1861 engraving.

his then-strange contraptions a whirl. Within hours, Thompson was on his way to Genoa, 90 miles across the Sierra. Navigating by the sun during the day and by the stars at night, with a 75-pound mail sack strapped to his back, he skimmed through an obstacle course of snowslides, tangled trees and deep crevasses. Three days later he dropped the mail sack at the feet of an astonished Genoa postmaster.

Thompson made the return run to Placerville, most of it downhill, in only two days—again carrying a bulging sack of mail. On his arrival, he

was mobbed by grateful miners, who, never having seen skis before, dubbed him "Snowshoe" Thompson.

The skiing mailman continued to make regular wintertime runs, in the course of which, it was said, he could outpace and even outhowl wolves. Unfortunately he didn't howl loudly enough about his spotty pay. In 1874, after risking his neck for nearly 20 years, he petitioned Congress for about \$6,000 in back salary due him. The money was promised, but unlike the mail that Thompson always saw through, it never did reach him.



*Through Hostile Country* was the title artist Oscar Berninghaus gave this painting of a stagecoach speeding across a desolate landscape—probably western Wyoming or Montana. An escort of cavalry with an Indian scout in buckskin helped deter attacks by local tribes resentful of intrusion.



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an of 2) Corbin Bernsen, attorney is thrust into dered to participate in a "D Woods" novel. (In Stereo)	News	Tonight Shc Mary Kate a Marion Rosin Stereo)
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## A triumphant timetable for the southern route



Stage line operator John Butterfield

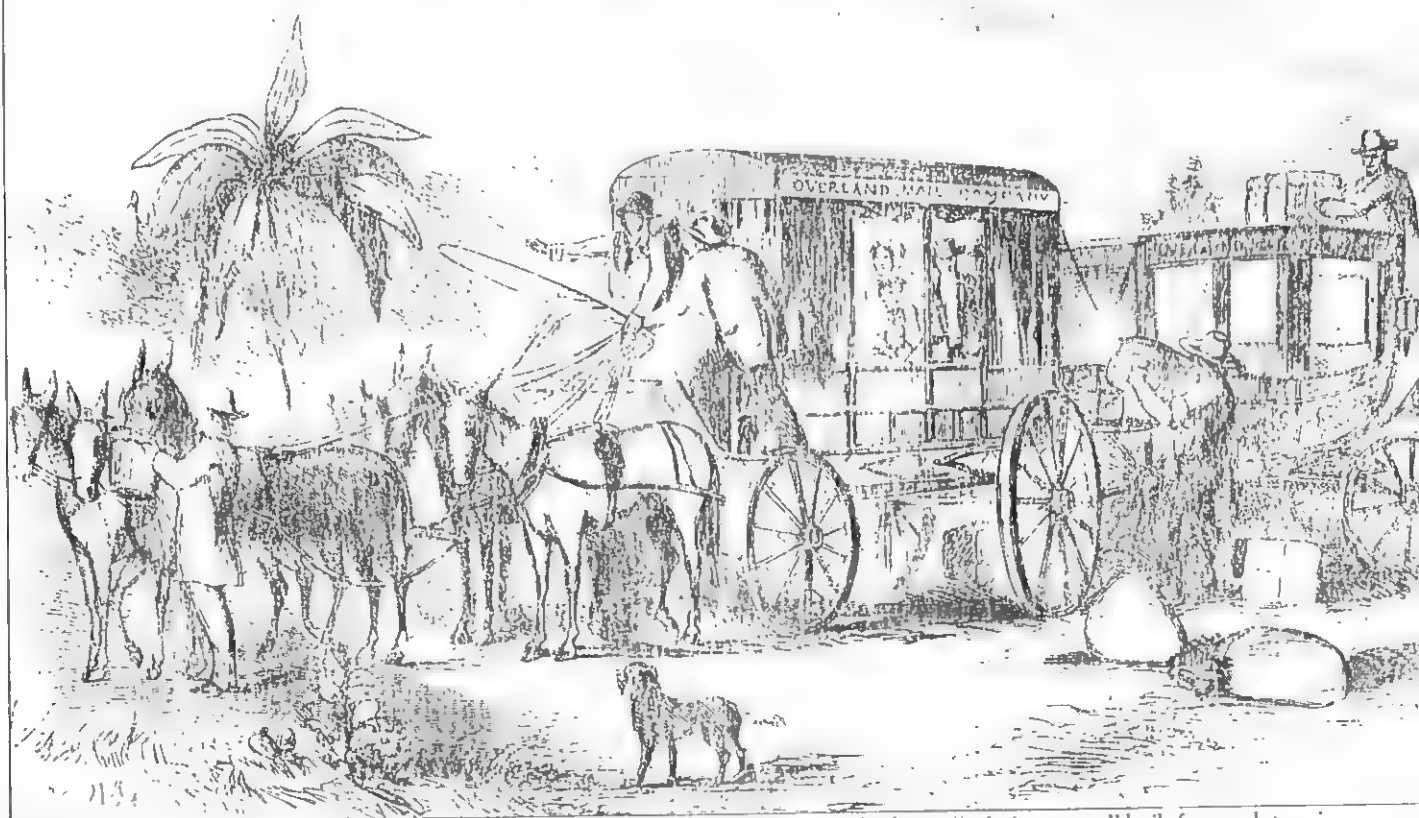
A lesser man than John Butterfield might well have faced instant bankruptcy in undertaking to run a stage line over the roundabout Oxbow Route. Starting from Memphis and St. Louis in the east and ending in California, the route was nearly 1,000 miles longer than it needed to be, as a result of the maneuverings of Southern politicians. Furthermore, it lay across unsettled country and would produce little profitable way-station traffic.

Butterfield nonetheless set to his task, buoyed in part by a \$600,000-a-year mail subsidy. Though his government contract called for a one-way schedule of 25 days, he saw to it that his vehicles usually made the trip in 24 days or less, at an average speed of four and a half miles an hour. The extra day

afforded a little leeway for breakdowns.

For his passengers' comfort, Butterfield did the best he could. Near the line's terminal points—where the roads were better—he provided handsome Concord coaches. But for most of the route, over what one rider described as "the worst road God ever built," travelers had to take their lumps in "celerity wagons"—comfortless vehicles designed for rough going.

Go they did. Butterfield preached, "Remember, boys, nothing on God's earth must stop the U.S. Mail," and indeed, for more than two years, nothing was permitted to. By the time the Oxbow was finally suspended on the eve of the Civil War, Butterfield's stages were delivering more mail to the Far West than all of the ships at sea.



Butterfield station hands transfer mail and passengers' baggage from a stagecoach to a mule-drawn "celerity wagon" built for rough terrain.

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The Oxbow Route's westbound schedule called for two stage departures a week, and completion of a run of some 2,800 miles in 25 days, with exactly 576½ hours allotted for actual travel time between way stops.

No. 2. GOING WEST. Jan. 1859.

LEAVE.	DAYS.	Hour.	Distance, Place to Place.	TIME ALLOWED
St. Louis, Mo., and } Memphis, Tenn., }	Monday and Thursday,	8.00 A.M.	Miles.	No. Hours.
Tipton, Mo.	Monday and Thursday,	6.00 P.M.	160	10
Springfield, "	Wednesday and Saturday,	7.45 A.M.	143	37½
Fayetteville, Ark.	Thursday and Sunday,	10 15 A.M.	100	26½
Fort Smith, "	Friday and Monday,	3.30 A.M.	65	17½
Sherman, Texas.	Sunday and Wednesday,	12.30 A.M.	205	45
Fort Belknap, "	Monday and Thursday,	9.00 A.M.	146½	32½
Fort Chadbourne, "	Tuesday and Friday,	3.15 P.M.	136	30½
Pecos River Crossing,	Thursday and Sunday,	3.45 A.M.	165	36½
El Paso,	Saturday and Tuesday,	11.00 A.M.	248½	55½
Soldier's Farewell,	Sunday and Wednesday,	8.30 P.M.	150	83½
Tucson, Arizona	Tuesday and Friday,	1.30 P.M.	184½	41

Gila River,* "	Wednesday and Saturday,	9.00 P.M.	141	31½
Fort Yuma, Cal.	Friday and Monday,	3.00 A.M.	135	30
Los Angeles, "	Sunday and Wednesday,	8.30 A.M.	254	53½
Fort Tejon, "	Monday and Thursday,	7.30 A.M.	96	23
Visalia, "	Tuesday and Friday,	11.30 A.M.	127	28
Firebaugh's Ferry, "	Wednesday and Saturday,	5.30 A.M.	82	18
(Arrive) San Francisco,	Thursday and Sunday,	8.30 A.M.	163	27

\* The Station referred to on the Gila River is 40 miles west of the Maricopa Wells.

This Schedule may not be exact—all employees are directed to use every possible exertion to get the Stage through in quick time, even though ahead of this time.

No allowance is made in the time for ferries, changing teams, &c. It is necessary that each driver increase his speed over the average per hour enough to gain time for meals, changing teams, crossing ferries, &c.

Every person in the Company's employ will remember that each minute is of importance. If each driver on the route loses 15 minutes, it would make a total loss of time, on the entire route, of 25 hours, or, more than one day. If each one loses 10 minutes, it would make a loss of 16½ hours, or the best part of a day.

If each driver gains that time, it leaves a margin against accidents and extra delays.

All will see the necessity of promptness; every minute of time is valuable, as the Company are under heavy forfeit if the mail is behind time.

JOHN BUTTERFIELD, President.



ity, for 31 acres  
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James Birch, a former New England coach-  
 man, emigrated to Sacramento in 1849,  
 bought a ranch wagon to carry passengers  
 to mining camps, and in five years built a  
 stage company worth one million dollars.

...a Pacific route by land."  
 ...the Sacramento Union.

Yet the man to whom Brown  
 awarded the contract, a New York-  
 er named John Butterfield, made the  
 route work—and work beautifully.  
 A thoroughgoing pragmatist, Butter-  
 field was a most logical choice. He  
 had been a stage driver in his youth,  
 went on to win control of all the  
 principal stage lines in central New  
 York State, and in 1850 helped  
 form the American Express Com-  
 pany, which quickly became one of  
 the giants in its field. For his new  
 enterprise, Butterfield dipped deep  
 into his corporate coffers, came up  
 with one million dollars, built 139 relay stations and  
 way stops, cut new roads, bridged streams and graded  
 hilly stretches. Then he bought 1,800 head of stock  
 and 250 of the best coaches, and hired some 800 men  
 to keep the stages rocking along.

On September 15, 1858, the Butterfield Overland  
 Mail Company was ready for its maiden run. For the  
 first time in history, a traveler could buy—for \$200—a  
 ticket to ride overland by coach all the way from the  
 banks of the Mississippi to the far edge of the Ameri-  
 can domain. The first stage completed its trip in ex-  
 actly 24 days, 18 hours and 26 minutes. Thereafter,  
 the stages continued to traverse the great arc twice a  
 week in as little as 21 days each way.

One passenger's view of the nature of Butterfield's  
 accomplishment was published in the *New York Post*.  
 Referring to the bugle used by stage drivers to an-  
 nounce their approach, he wrote: "The blast of the



stage horn as it rolls through the val-  
 leys and over the prairies of the  
 West, cheers and gladdens the heart  
 of the pioneer. As it sounds through  
 the valleys of Santa Clara and San  
 Jose, it sends a thrill of delight to  
 the Californian. He knows that it  
 brings tidings from the hearts and  
 homes he left behind him; it binds  
 him stronger and firmer to his be-  
 loved country."

Within California, the Butterfield  
 Overland Mail Company connected  
 with a system of transportation and  
 communication that bore only a faint  
 resemblance to the rude network of  
 the first Western expressmen. Al-

exander Todd had fallen by the wayside. Though he  
 had moved from the gold fields to Stockton and es-  
 tablished branches there and in other towns, he was  
 overtaken by a series of costly mishaps, notably the  
 theft of \$160,000 by embezzling employees. He had  
 sold out, and the company he had so shrewdly nurtured  
 wound up in the hands of an unrelated namesake, C.  
 A. Todd. In turn, C. A. Todd, like hundreds of other  
 small- and medium-sized operators, had sold out to a  
 firm that would come to dominate the express business  
 in California and all across the West—Wells, Fargo &  
 Company. Daniel Dancer's pack-mule operation, too,  
 was a part of the past. Where mule tracks had once led  
 from his old base of Marysville to gold country, there  
 were now roads jammed with massive freight wagons,  
 hundreds in a single week. As for James Birch, though  
 he was dead, his mark was visible everywhere. In  
 1854, he had initiated a move to consolidate his own  
 stage lines with those of his smaller rivals. The result,  
 hammered out at the conference table, was the Cali-  
 fornia Stage Company.

By the time John Butterfield's coaches began rolling  
 into the state, the California Stage Company was a co-  
 lossus. It had been able to survive a vast financial  
 panic in 1855 that toppled a number of large busi-  
 nesses of every sort. From Sacramento and Mother  
 Lode country its routes ran almost the entire length of  
 the state, reaching north into Oregon. The company  
 had become California's foremost road builder, sending

Each of California's many express companies put its own  
 mark, or frank, on the mail it carried; four examples appear  
 on the letters at left. The delivery charge was often scrawled  
 above the address, as in the "75" (cents) on the two lower  
 envelopes. This fee was due from the recipient, a point  
 some firms stressed by an ink-stamped "not paid." Beyond  
 express fees, all mail after 1855 also required prepaid U.S.  
 postage. If a postmaster was short of government stamps, he  
 wrote "paid" and the amount, as on the bottom letter. The  
 "W11" on the line below, jotted down by the express-  
 man, stood for the recipient's whereabouts—Whiskey Hill.

out crews to construct ferries and bridges, carve zig-zagging switchbacks down the face of mountain barriers and widen narrow canyons by blasting. It had routes of its own totaling some 1,970 miles, and its stage drivers traveled more than a million miles a year.

Everywhere along this immense, humming network, towns were growing into cities with civilized niceties. San Francisco's population had vaulted from some 2,000 in 1848 to perhaps 100,000 by 1858. Signs of stability were appearing in lesser towns that had been brawling mining camps a few years earlier.

But it was Sacramento, more than San Francisco or the mining towns, that epitomized California in the late 1850s — still raw beneath its veneer of amenities, and bursting with a sense of its own vigor. Sacramento was not only the hub of California's road system, but an important river port, linked to San Francisco by more than two dozen steamboats popularly referred to as "floating palaces." One of them, the *Wilson G. Hunt*, was a 186-foot vision of white enamel, gold-leaf decoration, brass fixtures and plush interior. It had been built in New York as a Coney Island excursion boat, and had made the long journey around the Horn with a load of forty-niners under its own steam.

Twice a day, Sacramento's populace, interest and energy came to focus on the docks. Everyone turned out at 4 p.m. to see the night boat off for San Francisco. Scores of stagecoaches would draw up through the milling crowds to deliver outbound passengers, mail, and as much as one million dollars' worth of gold dust.

Next morning the process was reversed; the people turned out to meet the steamer inbound from San Francisco. Now the stages were ready and waiting with fresh horses. The drivers roared out the destination of their lines to passengers coming down the gangplank. When the seats were filled, the drivers cracked whips over their teams and clattered off in all directions, bellowing the familiar warning of stage coachmen everywhere: "Clear the road!"

And behind all the din was an odd chuffing noise that, in time, would grow louder and louder until it drowned out the expressmen. The single locomotive of the Sacramento Valley Railroad — the only one in California — was setting off on its 22-mile run to the mining town of Folsom, offering an insolent blast of its whistle as a harbinger to the West of the road of iron to come.



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Blooded horses speed a fine Concord coach  
along one of the routes of the Califor-  
nia Stage Company — a 1,400-mile staging  
network, consolidated by James Birch, that  
by 1856 was the biggest in the nation.



CALIFORNIA STAGE COMPANY

*Incorporated November 1853*





A spectacular cascade spills into the Timpanagos River canyon, traversed by a Mormon road that joined Simpson's eastward route

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## Uncle Sam's own shortcut to California

The first wagon trails westward were pioneered by traders and emigrants, but the U.S. government, eager to speed settlement, followed close behind. The Army's Corps of Topographical Engineers was assigned to grade and bridge treacherous spots along the early trails, and to survey and build new roads.

Nowhere were these services more needed than in the Great Basin, a vast, arid depression east of the Sierra Nevada. To get through this region to California, most travelers took a roundabout trail along the brackish Humboldt River and across desert wastes—a route that was dotted with the graves of people who failed to make it. In 1859, Captain James Simpson of the Corps of Engineers began surveying a shortcut across the harrowing expanse.

Simpson's prospective route would start out from Camp Floyd, a military post south of Salt Lake City, and thrust almost due west to the town of Genoa. There it would connect with a road that had been recently built across the



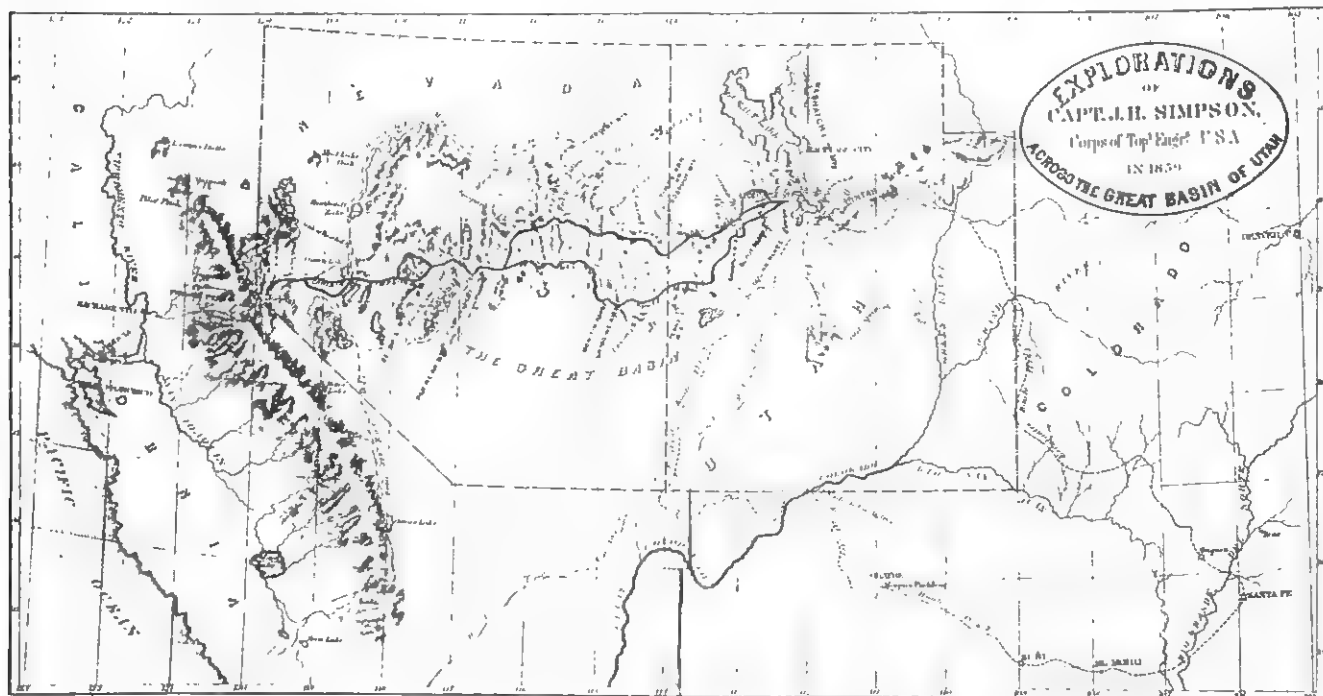
James H. Simpson in 1865

Sierra by Californians as a mail route to Nevada mining camps.

After preliminary forays to look over existing Mormon roads in Utah Territory (left), Simpson set out for Genoa with 12 supply wagons and a party that included 23 soldiers, two guides and the artist Henry von Beckh, whose

sketches formed the basis of the watercolors shown opposite and on the following pages. Striking across the Great Salt Lake desert, the party entered a series of little-known mountain ranges. As the guides roved ahead to find passes, Simpson compiled notes on the availability of water, grass and timber, and used an odometer to record mileage. He encountered only two arduous stretches—in the Lookout Mountains, where the guides themselves got lost and had to be found, and in the alkali flats beyond, where the party almost ran out of water.

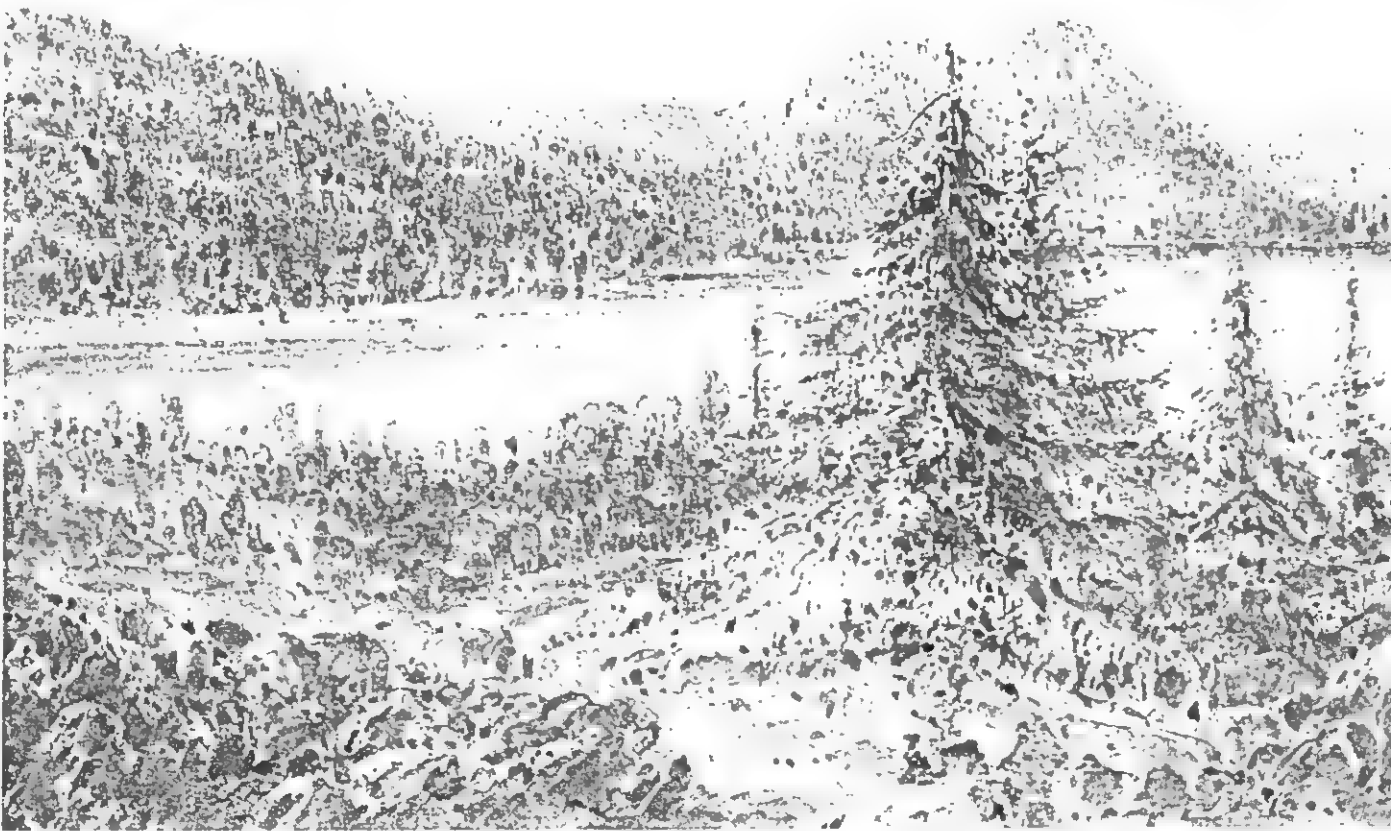
Six weeks after leaving Camp Floyd, Simpson and his helpers reached their destination—and exultantly calculated that they had cut 288 miles off the Humboldt River route. They turned east again to map a second way across the Great Basin. But the outbound passage proved shorter by 28 miles, and within a year emigrants, freight haulers and Pony Express riders had adopted it as the fastest way to the Far West.



Simpson's map traces his surveys from Camp Floyd to Genoa and back, through the mountains south of the trail along the Humboldt.



On the first easy leg of the trip, Simpson's caravan rolls across the Salt Lake Desert toward the mountain chains of the Great Basin



"Beautifully embosomed in the Sierra" was Simpson's description of Lake Bigler, named for a California governor and later given the Indian name



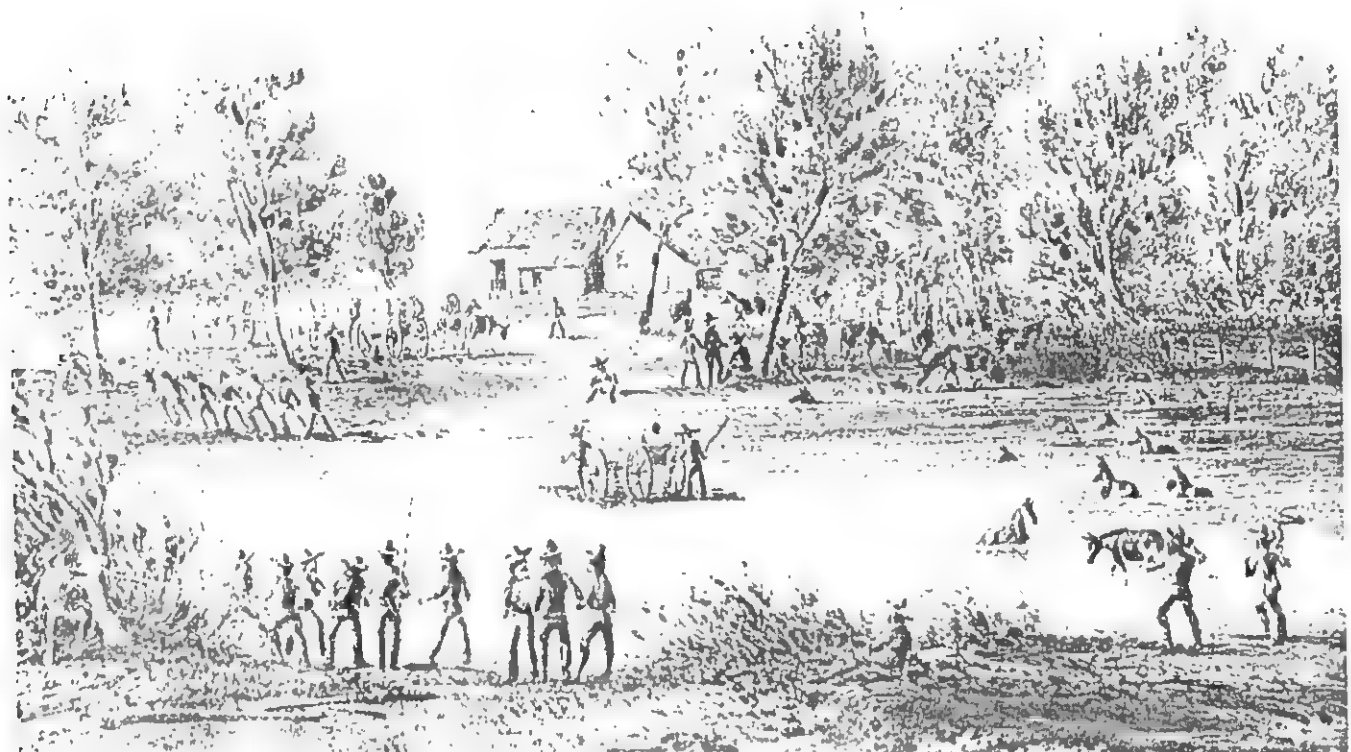
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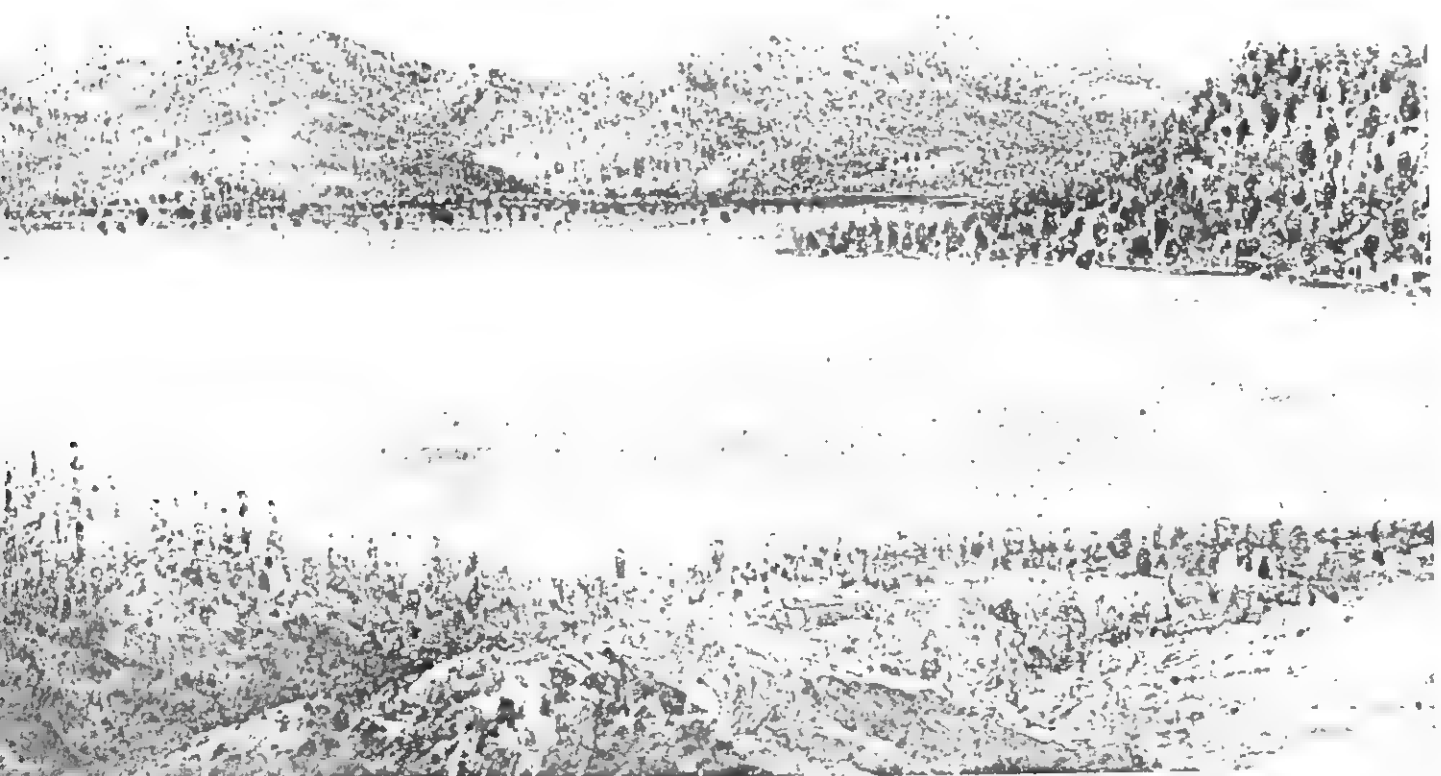
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Hauling on a rope secured to trees, the surveyors raft a supply wagon over the Carson River in Nevada, while the animals swim across.



of Tahoe. An existing wagon road around its southern shore linked the western terminus of Simpson's exploration to Placerville, California.



Exactly 531 miles from the starting point of their reconnaissance, Captain Simpson's party rides into the Mormon settlement of Genoa, nestled

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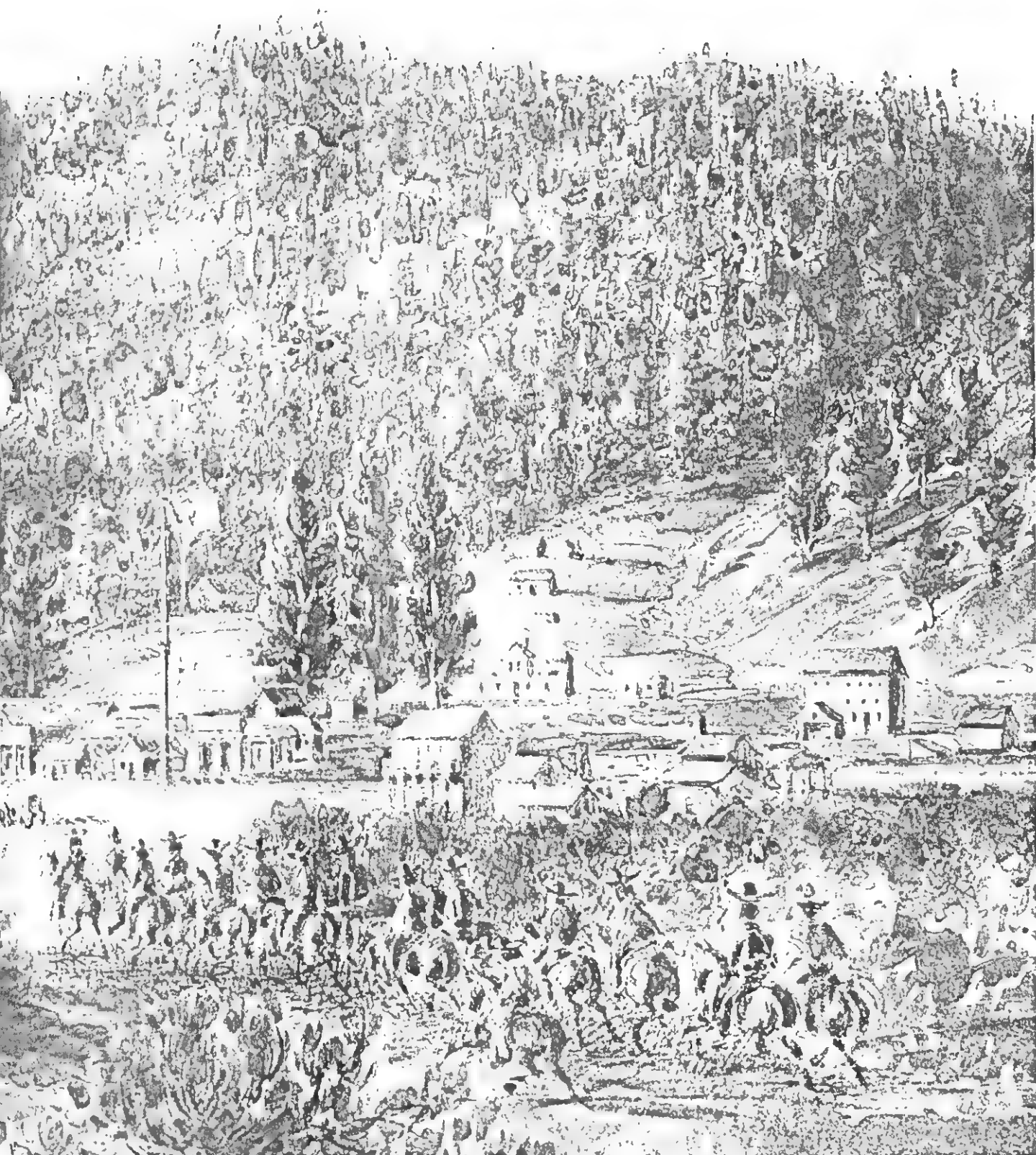
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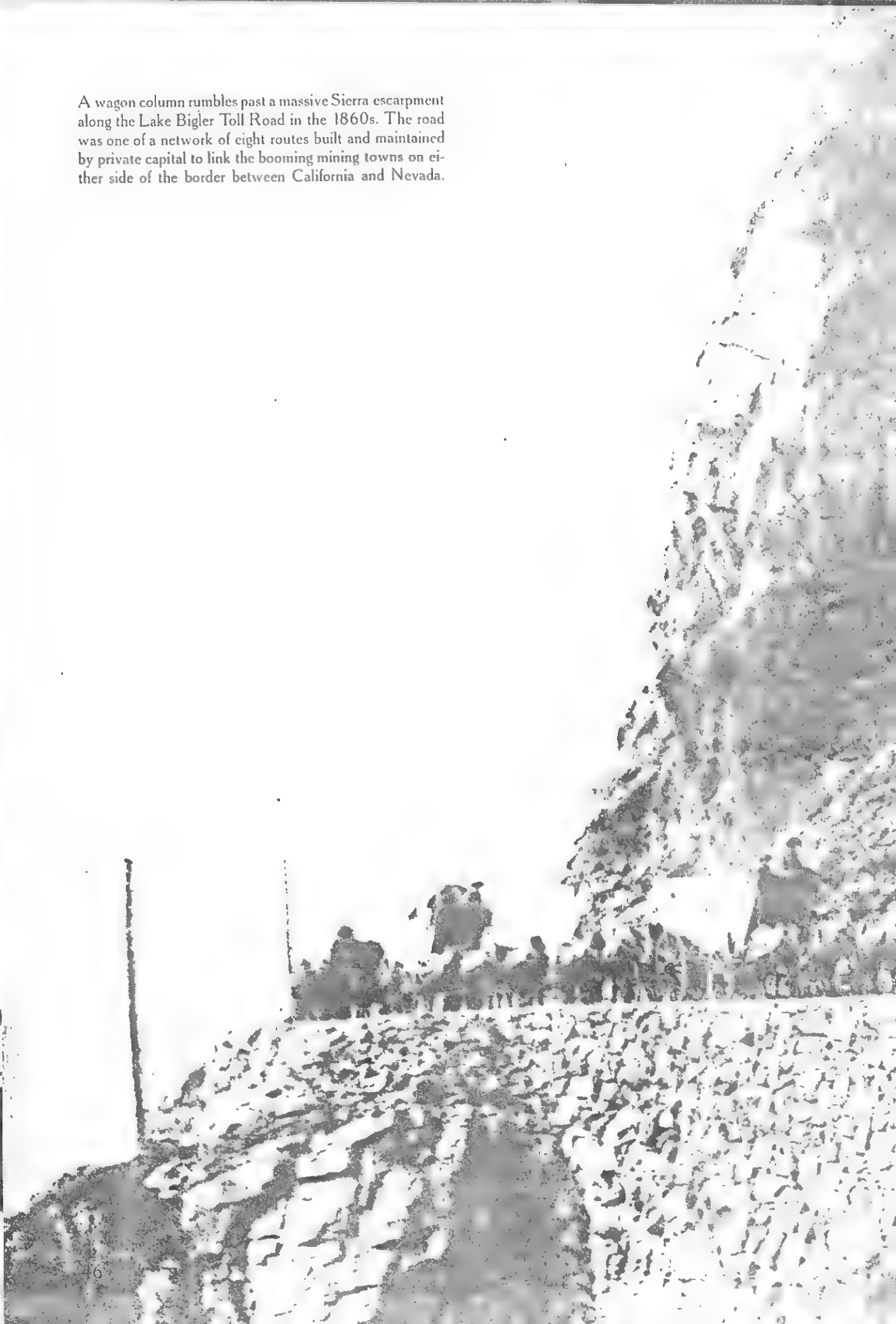
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in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. The town's 150 citizens marked the occasion by raising the American flag and firing a 13-gun salute.

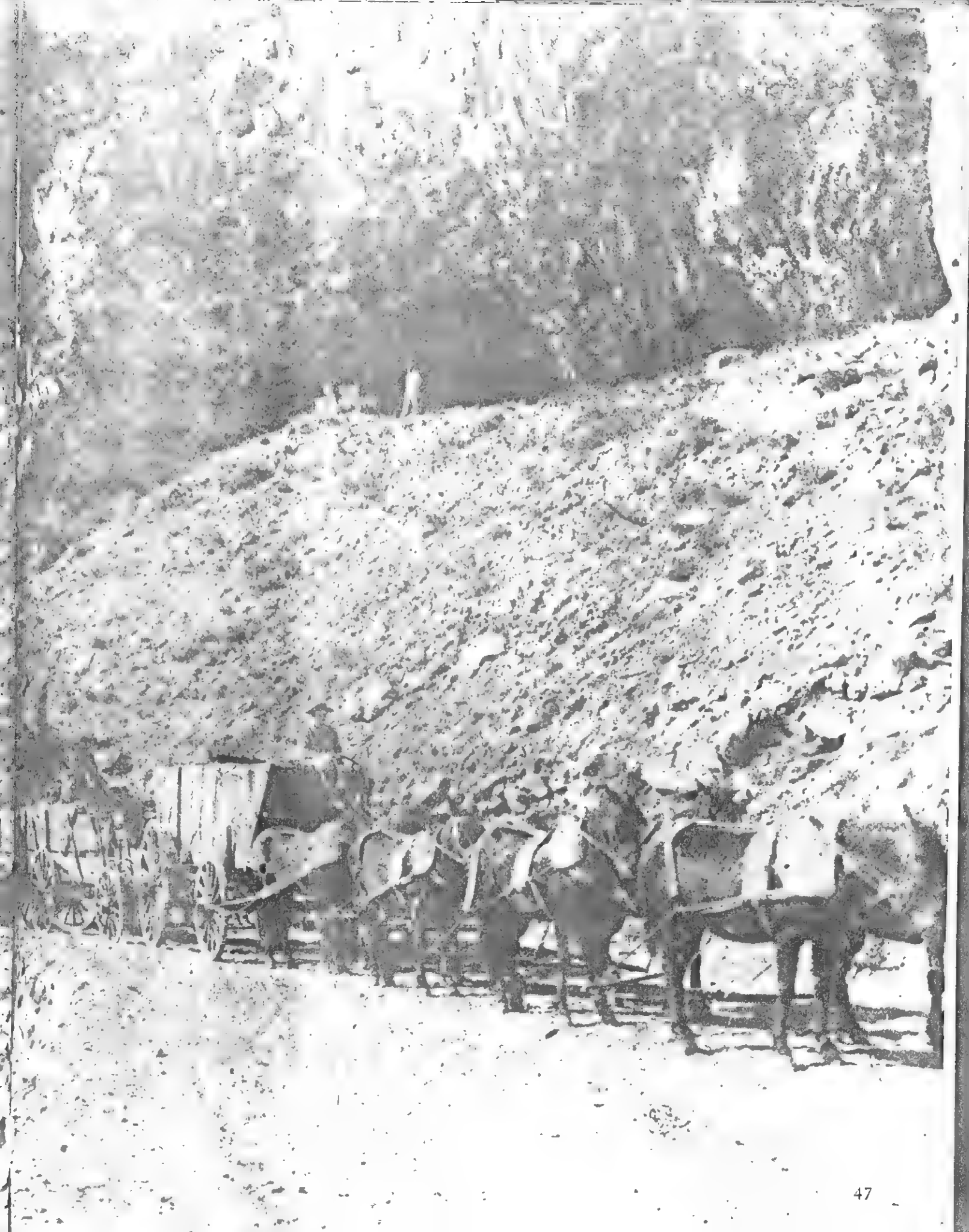


A wagon column rumbles past a massive Sierra escarpment along the Lake Bigler Toll Road in the 1860s. The road was one of a network of eight routes built and maintained by private capital to link the booming mining towns on either side of the border between California and Nevada.



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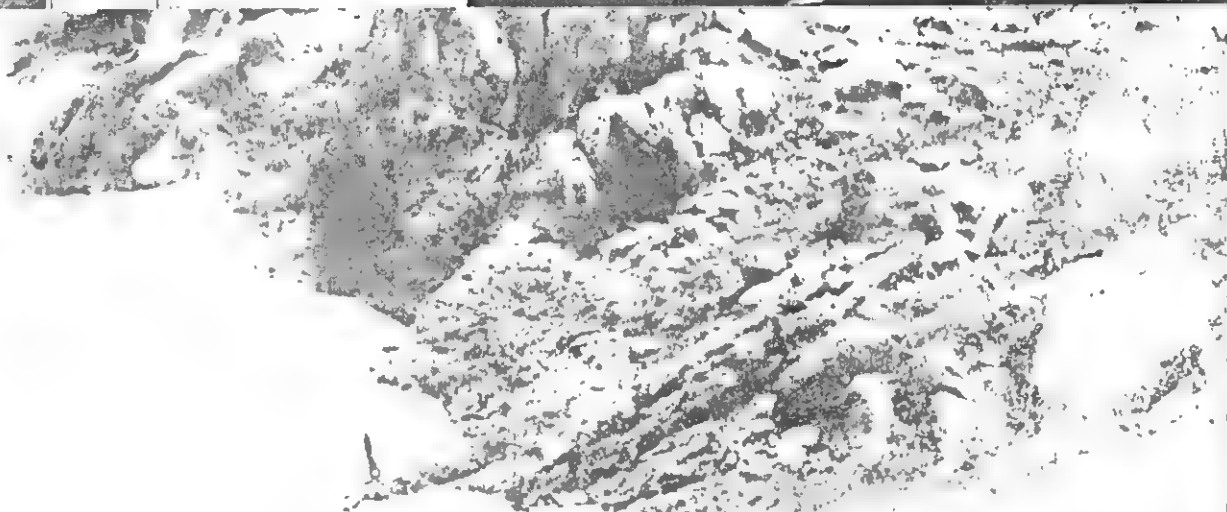
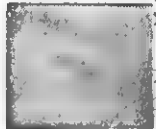




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With much of their cargo already off-loaded at previous settlements along the trail, wagons inch along a path cleared between steep snowbanks near the summit of the Sierra Nevada. Mountain passes were snowbound half of the year, restricting wagon freighting to spring and summer.



With much of their cargo already off loaded at previous settlements along the trail, wagons such as this one, cleared between steep snowbanks near the summit of the Sierra Nevada. Mountain passes were snowbound half of the year, restricting wagon traffic to spring and summer.







mounted wagonmaster's command to roll out  
to the Black Hills camps, an ox  
to the wagon's standard placement for  
the heavy car. This train's heavy car required out-  
sides of 10 pairs of oxen to pull the linked wagons.



taking at Raton Pass, on the trail's Mountain Branch, the going was so precipitous that wagons had to be eased down by ropes, chains and windlasses improvised from tree trunks. On Oregon Trail caravans, fording a river, the unruly South Platte terrified the calmest oxen and taxed the toughest teamsters; adding to such ordeals, the travelers had to contend with the alkali dust that lay as deep as six inches on much of the overland trails, waiting to be churned into gritty, blinding clouds by wagon wheels and animal hoofs.

Even in the best of circumstances, the long hauls of the freight caravans were grueling ventures, yet they were a vital moment to people on the frontier, serving quite literally as life lines. Until 1869, when rails spanned the continent, both the survival and the economic growth of the West depended on the durability of wagon axles, the hardihood of oxen and mules, the tenacity of wagon drivers and—perhaps most important—the vision and daring of the freight entrepreneurs.

Wagon-freighting was a business that could enrich a man or bankrupt him. A company that undertook to carry Army supplies on one 1858 journey from Nebraska City to Utah might, for example, receive \$1.80 per 100 pounds hauled per 100 miles. The distance covered was about 1,200 miles. If 25 wagon trains

were sent out—each train consisting of 25 cargo wagons, each wagon holding 7,000 pounds—the gross receipts would have totaled more than \$945,000. Even with the company's outlay of roughly \$500,000 for wagons, oxen, and wages and provisions for the teamsters, the net profit from this journey would have been a handsome one indeed.

Not all Army contracts involved such great quantities of cargo or such long distances to travel, and civilian freight caravans tended to be much smaller. Still, the profit was always potentially good—unless events intervened. Any one of a number of unpredictable mishaps—freakish weather, spoilage of cargoes, trail accidents—could bring financial ruin. The vagaries of the business required men of special strengths.

The massive operation that dazzled Horace Greeley at Leavenworth lay in the hands of three such men. William Hepburn Russell, William Bradford Waddell and Alexander Majors were as incongruous a trio as ever formed a business partnership, yet their very differences proved the key to their joint success. Russell, the senior partner, was a comfort-loving aristocrat more at ease in the banks and board rooms of the East than on the sweaty caravan trails; an irrepressible promoter, he excelled at wooing the financial backers the firm

needed. Waddell, dour and stolid, had worked his steady way up the ladder from lead miner to prosperous wholesaler and retailer of produce, grain and hemp; it was he who oversaw day-to-day office matters. Majors, a former farmer, much preferred the outdoor life; a man of iron discipline and austere ways, he took naturally to the heavy responsibility of supervising the wagon trains en route. Perfectly complementing one another, the three partners made a team that was soon to dominate the Western freighting business.

The name of Russell, Majors & Waddell became so synonymous with freighting that it sometimes seemed as if the firm had invented the idea. Actually, by the time the partners got together in 1854 their opportunity lay in adapting and improving techniques already well tested by earlier entrepreneurs. Among these were William Becknell, the Missourian who in 1821 had pioneered trading on the Santa Fe Trail, and the men who followed in his wake over the next three decades. Though Becknell and his successors were primarily interested in trading, a development crucial to the future of freighting came out of a chance experiment on the journey of a wagon train bound for Santa Fe in 1829. Up to then, the wagons' motive power had been supplied occasionally by horses but primarily by mules. In

1829 oxen were introduced, and their use had a stunning impact on the entire economics of freighting.

The man responsible for this revolution was interested neither in trading nor in freighting but only in doing his duty as an officer of the U.S. Army. He was Major Bennet Riley, commander of a battalion of 180 infantrymen who had been assigned to escort the wagon train from Round Grove, Kansas, to the Arkansas River—then regarded as the border with Mexico—to prevent harassment by Indians. No sizable American military unit had ever traveled that far, almost 500 miles, without sources of supplies, but in this uninhabited area such sources did not exist. So Riley assembled his own supply wagons, 19 in all, and he chose oxen to draw them. The traders he was to accompany were dismayed; they did not think oxen were strong or fast enough for the trip. Still, Riley had his reasons, one of them decidedly pragmatic: a lack of sufficient funds to buy mules. But he also saw advantages in oxen that others did not. As his men ate into the supplies, he could slaughter some oxen for beef; moreover, he would not have to carry feed for the animals because, he figured, they could live on grass.

From the start, the military's oxen consistently kept up with the wagon-train mules. Riley and a member of

#### SINGLE-FILE OX TRAIN

In a single-file wagon train, wagons swung out alternately in opposite directions to form a corral. Wagons were hitched end to end against each other, making a solid wall impenetrable except for one or two openings.

#### DOUBLE-WING OX TRAIN

A double-wing train could corral twice as fast because the two wings swung out simultaneously. As the arcs formed, the wagon tongues were turned inward; the animals were then unhitched inside the corral.

### Military precision in a civilian wagon train

Wagon freighting, which was first used on a large scale to haul supplies for the U.S. Army, resembled a military operation in many ways. Each wagon train, called an outfit, was led by a wagonmaster, whose authority over his men equaled that of a commanding officer. He patrolled the train and also rode ahead of it, setting the pace and scouting stream fords and campsites.

The assistant wagonmaster rode near the rear of the train, where newer drivers were generally assigned, and also kept an eye on the mess wagon. If the train was ox-drawn, he also watched over the "calf yard"—a herd of extra cattle that supplied replacements for lame or injured animals.

The teamsters who actually kept the wagons on the move either walked or rode, depending on whether the train

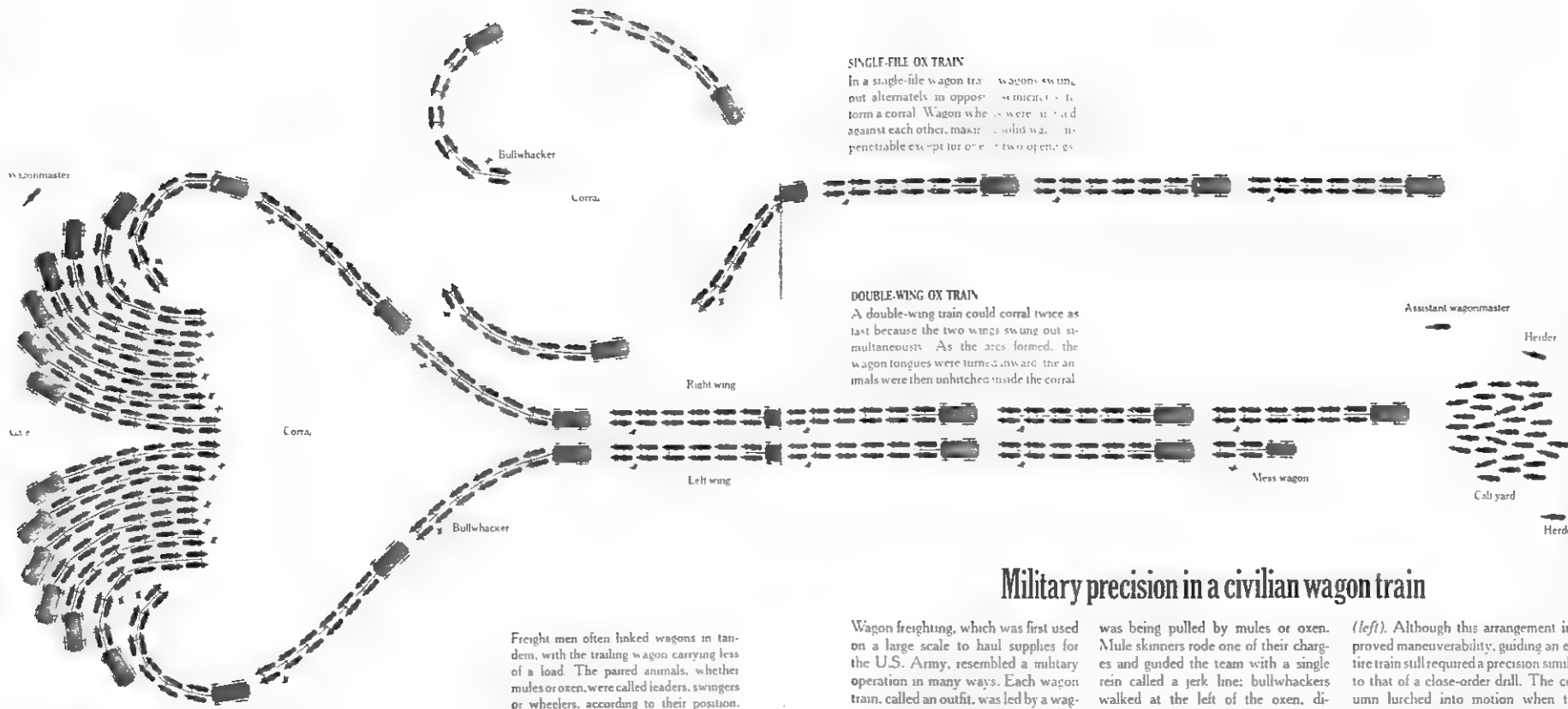
was being pulled by mules or oxen. Mule skippers rode one of their charges and guided the team with a single rein called a jerk line; bullwhackers walked at the left of the oxen, directing them by cracking a whip over the head of one or another animal.

Freight men hotly disputed the relative merits of the two species. What it came down to was that mules were faster, oxen cheaper. Mules pulled wagons at two and a half miles an hour, versus two for oxen—a difference that could knock a week off the run from the banks of the Missouri to Denver. But a pair of oxen could be purchased for only \$40 to \$160, while a pair of mules cost \$200 to \$400.

After 1860, many freight companies replaced large wagons with smaller versions that could be coupled together

(left). Although this arrangement improved maneuverability, guiding an entire train still required a precision similar to that of a close-order drill. The column lurched into motion when the wagonmaster bellowed his command of "stretch out!" or "roll on!" On narrow trails the formation was single file. Parallel files, called wings, often were used on the open plains and permitted quicker defense in Indian country.

The basic defensive maneuver, employed under attack and also as a matter of course every night, was to corral, or circle, the wagons, one abutting the other in a solid phalanx. With the animals grazing outside the corral—tended by night herders and teamsters whose turn it was for guard duty—the rest of the company had reasonable assurance of safe, though exhausted, sleep.



Freight men often linked wagons in tandem, with the trailing wagon carrying less of a load. The paired animals, whether mules or oxen, were called leaders, swingers or wheelers, according to their position.

#### OX-DRAWN WAGONS



#### MULE-DRAWN WAGONS





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## The rugged construction of a cargo carrier

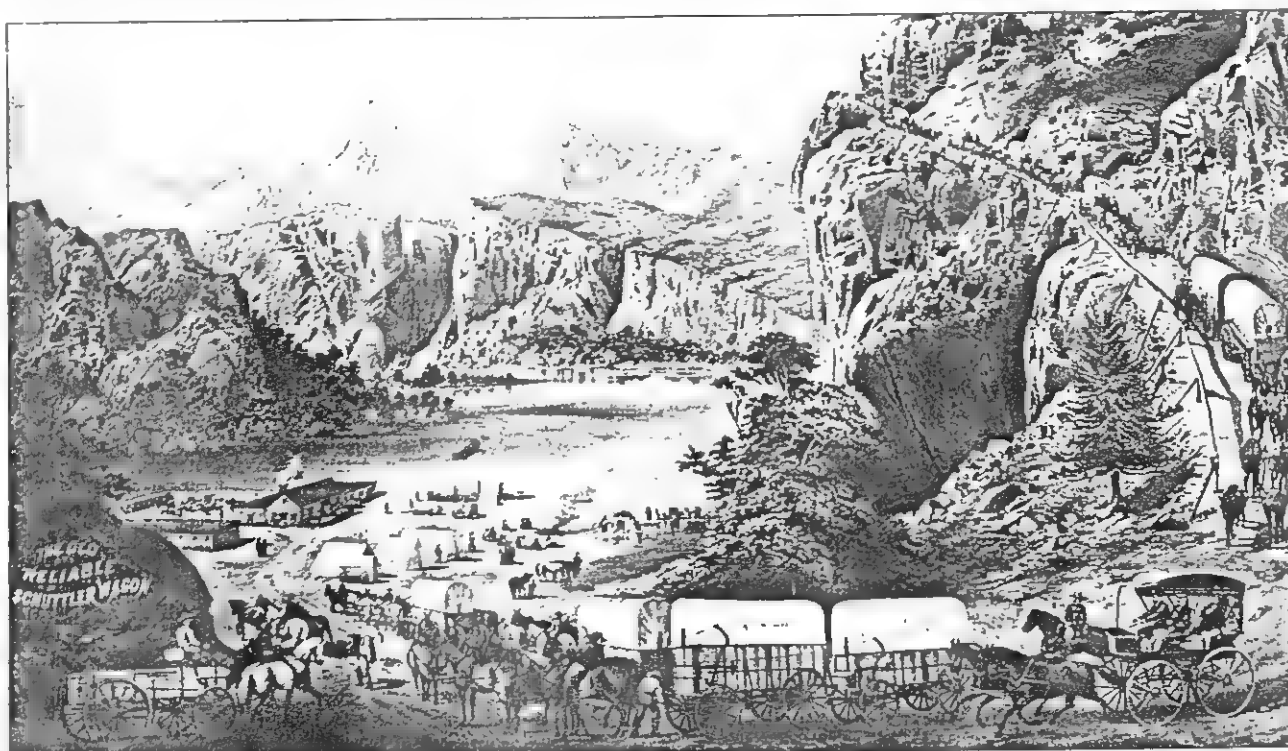
Most wagons built in the United States during the early 19th Century were produced slowly and in varying quality by small concerns that were often one-man operations. The nation's westward surge from the 1840s onward changed all that. Scores of companies sprang up to supply vehicles for the transport of people and goods beyond the Missouri. Some firms even boasted of specialties; Peter Schuttler of Chicago, for example, made wagons that could be coupled together (*below*). However, Schuttler's output never matched that of the wagon industry's two giants: the J. Murphy Company of St. Louis and the Studebaker Brothers Manufactur-

ing Company of South Bend, Indiana.

Studebaker featured an extensive line of vehicles ranging from ambulances for the military to carriages for the gentry. For both companies, however, freight wagons were the staple product, as meticulously crafted as the most glittering surrey. Irish-born Joseph Murphy would not allow his workmen to use augers to bore holes when they had to bolt planks together; instead they burned the holes through with red-hot irons to keep the surrounding wood from cracking or rotting. John, Clem and Peter Studebaker enforced equally high standards. They aged the hardwoods in their wagons for a period of three to

five years to prevent shrinkage in the dry Western climate, and they had their black hickory axles boiled in oil to drive out moisture. For all such perfectionism, the cost of most freight wagons was held to less than \$200 by quantity production. By 1874 the 550 workers at the Studebaker brothers' plant, with the help of a steam-powered production line, were turning out more than 30 wagons a day.

Like Joseph Murphy, the Studebakers were able to retire as millionaires. The brothers had the added pleasure of seeing their enterprise chalk up a record as the largest of its kind in the world—producer of a total of three quarters of a million wagons.



An advertisement for the Peter Schuttler Company features tandem wagons winding their way down a mountain road toward an idyllic campsite.

High-living William Russell (*left*) and tightfisted William Waddell (*right*), though poles apart in personality, joined in successful ventures ranging from real estate to a freighting empire that covered the West.



pounds of military supplies to the garrison at Santa Fe. He had enough capital to invest in the necessary stock and provisions, but not enough to buy wagons. Since the Army officers knew and respected him, they arranged for the Army to sell him wagons on credit. Brown executed the contract, made \$23,000 on it and paid for the wagons. He managed the entire project with such efficiency that the Army decided to advertise for more civilian contractors—and the boom era of Western freighting had begun.

Brown's success did not escape the notice of William Hepburn Russell, the future promotion genius of Russell, Majors & Waddell. Russell came from Vermont, but he was now living in Lexington, in western Missouri—a roughhewn setting for the blue-blooded descendant of Lord William Russell, who had been beheaded in England in 1683 for plotting against King Charles II. On the frontier, Russell remained an uncompromising grandee. He was always well tailored and well barbered, and he prized fine food—a trait that gradually rounded his figure. He avoided physical exertion; the body below his animated face was soft. But he was a shrewd, tough high-stakes speculator, full of self-confidence. He conceived a new business venture every few weeks, and by early middle age was a full-

fledged capitalist—president of an insurance company and a road-building company, a director of two local railroads and of a branch of the Bank of Missouri, and a partner in a land speculation venture.

Such a man could hardly have stayed out of the lucrative freighting business. Russell, indeed, had taken a flyer in it before the boom, in 1847. With a partner, E. C. McCarty, he had dispatched the first wagon train ever to carry civilian cargo from Westport Landing to Santa Fe. Russell didn't take to the trail himself, of course; he helped assemble the goods, wagons and stock, sent them on their way and then went about with an ear cocked for news. Much could happen out there in the Southwest, and he eagerly queried returning travelers about conditions on the trail and the rumors that flew along it. In a way, Russell was like an 18th Century Yankee shipowner who dispatched his sailing vessels from Boston harbor to China and waited months to learn if he was rich or ruined—the answer depending on the weather and the economy and honesty of his ship captains.

The 1847 civilian cargo venture paid off, and Russell and McCarty repeated it in 1848. But with James Brown's success that year in hauling supplies for the Army, Russell predictably decided that he wanted a

Alexander Majors, the trail-wise partner of Russell and Waddell, gave every employee of the freighting firm a pair of Colt revolvers for defense against Indians and a Bible for defense against "moral contaminations."



then did something characteristic: he made each man sign a pledge. "While I am in the employ of A. Majors," it said, "I agree not to use profane language, not to get drunk, not to gamble, not to treat animals cruelly, and not to do anything else that is incompatible with the conduct of a gentleman. And I agree, if I violate any of the above conditions, to accept my discharge without any pay for my services."

The pledge reflected Majors' faith in the Bible he carried, the sermons he preached, and the practice he instituted on that first trip of pausing Sundays to rest the stock and give the teamsters time to meditate on their duties to their Maker. People joked about Majors' devoutness, but the jests were tempered by respect for the man's fairness, decency and good judgment. If his dedication to Scripture surpassed that of most of his men, he was still always one of them on the trail, even after

he grew rich. Sometimes he rode along as wagonmaster, sometimes he walked beside his teams. When he had several trains on the road, he would shuttle from one to another with a blanket and a mess kit tied to his saddle. At nightfall he would stop with the men, share the food, sit around the fire swapping tales and, after prayer, sleep on the ground beneath a wagon.

Those Sundays off, which Majors insisted upon in obedience to the command of God, provided practical rewards from the start. Majors' six wagons, with the rested oxen, made that first round trip to Santa Fe and back to Missouri in 1848 in the record time of 9 days, and their owner cleared \$650 on each wagon. He repeated the trip in 1849; that year, with 20 wagons and 100 oxen—an unusually large operation for the time—he netted the substantial sum of \$13,000.

Like Russell, his partner-to-be, Majors quickly sensed the attractions of a military contract. In the summer of 1850 he heard that the Fort Leavenworth quartermaster had 20 wagonloads destined for Fort Mann near the present Dodge City, some 300 miles from Leavenworth. It was well past the normal starting time for a freight odyssey, but Majors contracted to transport 103,644 pounds. He reached Fort Mann on schedule and found the place still under construction, so he hired out his wagons and men to haul logs from a creek 25 miles away. His first military contract had worked out even better than he expected.

By 1854, only six years after Majors had gone into freighting, his stock and equipment were worth more than \$100,000, and he was the leading freight operator in Missouri. He was running any kind of freight, military or civilian, and he still took regularly to the trail, moving from train to train and sleeping where night caught him. His military contract in 1854 alone required the use of 100 wagons and some 1,200 oxen, and the employment of 120 men.

At the peak of Majors' career as an independent, change overtook the young freighting business, or at least the military part that was then its mainstay. The Army decided that dealing with a variety of contractors was unsatisfactory. Negotiating separate agreements took too much time; moreover, dividing responsibility for deliveries was not altogether a reliable method. The system had a disadvantage for a contractor as well. A contract ran for only a year, and the holder had no way



helves, leather, comput- dental exam gauze. ALL IT! es, pro-

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**KG Size bed w/pier group sot. & dresser w/mirror,**

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## INSTRUCTIONS TO WAGON - TEAMSTERS, AND ALL

Employees connected with our Trains.

1st. Commence with first wagon and corral half the wagons on the right hand side the ground selected.

2d. Stop the middle wagon of the train directly up and not less than 20 to 25 feet from the first wagon, and corral opposite. This will make a wide gap, which is very necessary. The wagon-master should be on his feet during corraling.

3d. As it requires three men to corral a wagon, you must select an experienced hand to drive your lead team, so that when it stops he can assist the next teamster, he being on one side, the wagon master on the other, and the teamster with his lead cattle to prevent them tangling with the team ahead. He cannot assist until he is released by the assistant, who must be on foot.

4th. When about corraling, caution your men against exciting the cattle, by hollering and cracking whips at them. They should be so careful that a long, desperate "whoa" would stop their teams at the exact spot required.

5th. Teamster should not commence driving until that side of the corral is closed, then they will be on with the leaders and continue down to the wheelers, always losing the chain and yoke from those yoked.

6th. If water be near the camp, let the side feed to it instead of being driven there. But if necessary to drive them let them linger some time about the water, so that they will all become tired and have a chance to satisfy their thirst.

7th. See that the cattle get on the best feeding ground in the vicinity of the camp and also that when turned out that they have a sufficient guard by day and night and never to be left without a guard.

8th. In driving cattle to corral, men enough must be employed to encircle them and drive them directly in, and when at a distance from camp, drive them very slowly, as fast driving injures them greatly.

9th. No man should begin yoking before the cattle have had two or three minutes to become quieted in, then all should enter and yoke in a quiet gentle manner. First yoke the wheelers and chain them to the front wheel outside the corral, or hitch them to the tongue; secondly, yoke the leaders and fasten them to the wagon, on the inside; then the yoke next the leaders, and so on till the whole team is yoked and hitched up, when they will be taken out of the corral and 1-1-1 to the wagon.

10th. While yoking a man must be in the front gap and two or three in the hind one. If not required at the gaps, the wagon master must be instructing the teamsters how to yoke with the greatest facility.

11th. After leaving corral, do not travel more than 1-2 to 1 mile before stopping 5 to 10 minutes for the cattle to rest and graze, particularly if the weather is warm and cattle very full. When you have selected a capable hand to lead the train, always keep him as leader, and let all the teamsters keep the place they had when starting, they soon learn most at way to manage their teams, and the train soon learn the art of corraling.

12th. When traveling or corraling every man must keep a strict observance to the password, so that if any accident occurs in the train the whole train may be notified at once and all assistance rendered that is necessary.

13th. Drive the oxen into the corral in the morning as soon as the teamsters can see to yoke, and travel till about 10 a. m., varying an hour more or less, according to camping ground. Remain in camp 2 or 3 hours and then make the evening drive. These rules are for conducting a loaded train.

14th. The same rules may be observed in an empty train, in regard to hitching up as early as you can see, but in this case travel until 7 or 8 o'clock a. m., according to the time of getting off. As a general thing an empty train should not travel more than from 6 to 8 miles; and a loaded train from 7 to 10, according to camping ground. The hands should cook and eat in such time as to enable the train to hitch up again in an hour and a half to two hours, when you will make another drive of from 6 to 8 miles, and then remain in camp 3 to 4 hours, as this is the warm part of the day, and this will give animals and men a chance to rest, then hitch up, always taking your outfit cattle for the teams, and make an evening drive, which will sometimes throw you a little after dark in coming to camp. When arrived turn out your cattle, put out your guard, and let the rest of the hands go to bed. This will give hands two meals a day, which is sufficient for men on the plains, as they eat hearty and have strong diet.

15th. Before starting see that the lock chains are properly wrapped, so as to prevent cutting the spokes, and to keep them so during the whole trip you should provide yourself with suitable gunny sacks before starting.

16th. Keep your wagon well greased, as a failure in this oftentimes ruins boxes, also, once a week, or oftener, have a little grease put in the hook of each ox chain, in the girth-neck of the tongue, and in the yoke staples which have rings.

17th. Do not allow the men to whip their teams at all. The use of profane language is strictly forbidden. We expect our train to observe the Sabbath, and whenever an opportunity occurs to hear preaching, embrace it. We want our men to pay due respect to all persons they meet on the road; whether Indians or whites, as many difficulties often occur from abuse and insult offered to unoffensive people.

18th. The wagon master must see that all his orders are obeyed promptly and exactly as given; if this is the case he will be respected, and it is our wish that he should see that the hands cultivate a feeling of self respect and friendship, that nothing but the kindest feeling may exist among them. This is necessary for the well-being of every body of men associated together promiscuously as they are with trains on the plains.

19th. You will see by these rules that loaded trains ought to travel from 15 to 18 miles per day, the weather being ordinarily good, this being done in two drives, as heretofore with one returning trains should try to travel 18 to 21 miles per day in ordinary good weather, this being done in three drives, as heretofore stated.

20th. We will add that the statements made above are facts that have come under our personal observation during an experience of several years on the plains, and we know them to be of indispensable importance, and that they must be strictly obeyed in order to follow the plains with any success.

RUSSELL, MAJORS & WADDELL.

Majors set forth these commandments for all of his wagon crews. Hard-bitten teamsters may have observed some of his pious strictures in the breach, but his highly practical advice became gospel for freighters.

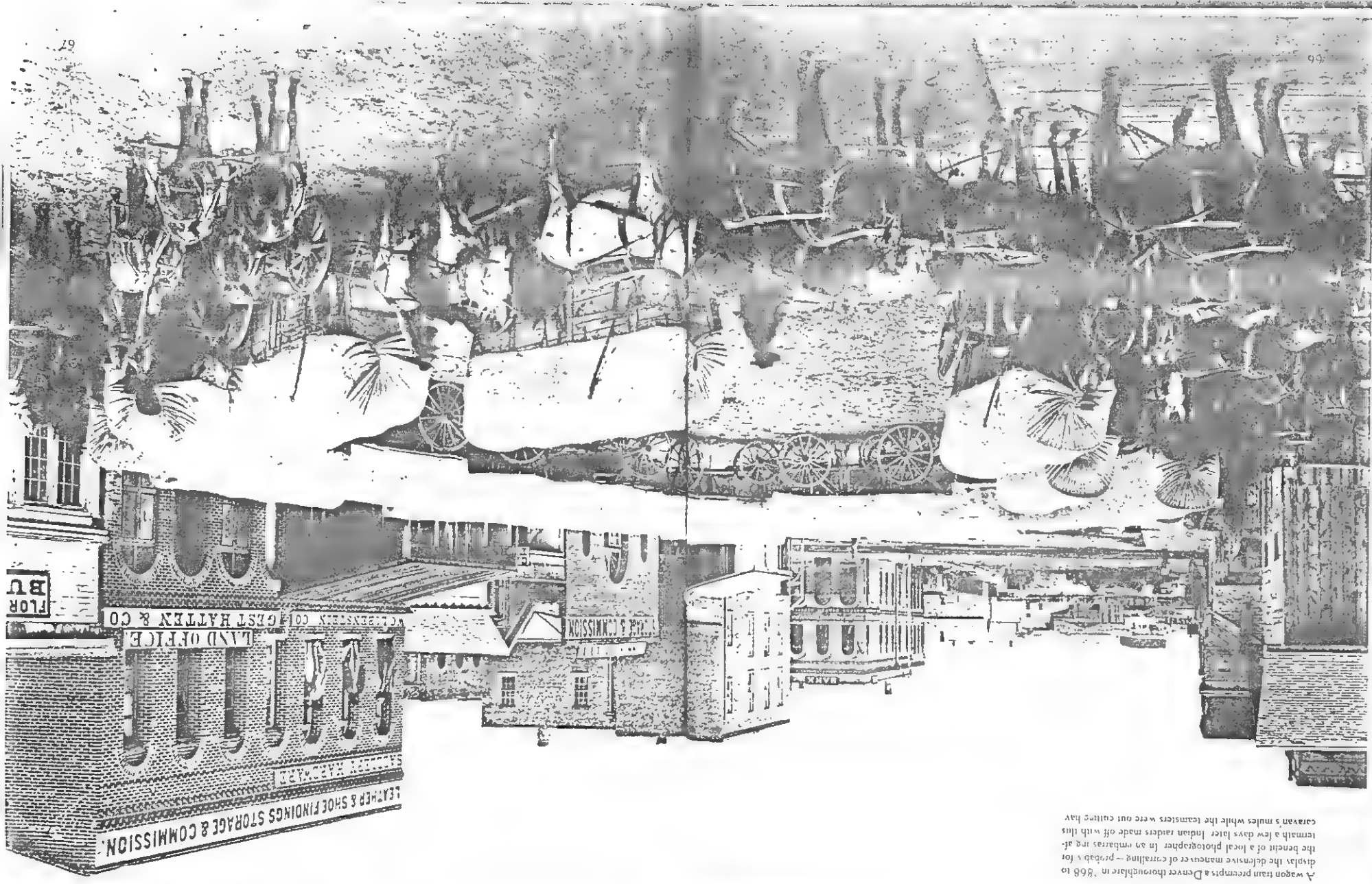
of knowing whether his bid for the next year would prevail over a competitor's. And so he was faced with a choice of disposing of his stock and wagons at the end of a freighting season, or keeping at least some of them over the winter—an expensive gamble.

Late in 1854 the Army announced that the next year it would award a single contract, for two years, for all of its hauling west of the Missouri River. It would be the biggest and most remunerative freighting contract ever awarded in that area. But there was a problem. Whoever got the contract would have to buy the necessary wagons and stock, pay the teamsters' wages and provision them adequately. No single freighting firm with experience west of the Missouri had the capital or credit to make the immense outlay of funds that was required—or to sustain losses that might be incurred en route, since the Army would not be responsible for them. But two or more freight operators could swing the deal, so Majors and Russell and Waddell began discussing a merger, and in December of 1854 formally joined forces. On March 27, 1855, the Fort Leavenworth quartermaster, on behalf of the War Department, signed a two-year contract giving the new partners a monopoly on military freighting originating from the Missouri westward. Under the terms of the agreement, they would be paid at varying rates depending on the month in which a wagon train traveled. For example, in May, when the weather was no longer chancy, the rate for moving 100 pounds of freight every 100 miles from Leavenworth to Fort Union in New Mexico was \$1.14; in the fall, when the elements were more threatening, the rate increased to \$2.

The firm of Russell, Majors & Waddell was to net a profit of \$300,000 on this first contract. No doubt the partners glimpsed the glittering potential, for they set about meeting the initial challenge with a remarkable show of efficiency and harmony. Each man contributed \$20,000 to the \$60,000 capital and each assumed the role for which his talents fitted him. Russell, with his connections and flair, was to obtain the added bank credit that was vitally needed. Waddell was to run the headquarters and keep a canny Scottish eye on all expenditures. Majors was to take charge of manning, organizing and operating the wagon trains.

As their headquarters, the partners chose the town of Leavenworth, conveniently close to the big quar-

A wagon train preempts a Denver thoroughfare in '868 to  
display the defensive maneuver of corralling — probably for  
the benefit of a local photographer. In an embarras ing af-  
termath a few days later Indian raiders made off with this  
caravan's mules while the teamsters were out cutting hay



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Hiring  
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Three teamsters polish off a meal in the Colorado high country. A standard repast on the trail featured beans, bacon, flapjacks, bread (made in either a skillet or a Dutch oven), dried fruit and boiling-hot coffee.



windmill and a water tank. It was so fixed that a person could not secure any water without climbing to the top of the storage tank and there was no ladder. The old freighter was hot and thirsty and his team needed water. He drew his six-shooter and shot the bottom of the tank full of holes. He secured the water."

Mark Twain, who happened to eat dinner at a stagecoach stop in company with some 20 teamsters, described them as "a very, very rough set." Little wonder. A bullwhacker walked most of the time, for freight wagons had no seats and the only place to ride, sitting or standing, was on the wagon tongue. When there was mud the bullwhacker waded. When it rained, he got drenched and then slept on wet ground beneath his wagon. His pay was usually \$20 or \$25 a month, plus dubious victuals. His clothing was stained with mud, dust, sweat, food grease and flying tobacco juice.

Frontier communities welcomed the teamster because he displayed a mighty capacity in the saloons and little

discrimination about what he consumed. Frank A. Root, the stagecoach express messenger, described the potable purveyed as "old Bourbon whisky" in a saloon that sprang up on one freight trail: "To a few gallons of sod corn juice [a distillate of corn fodder] the proprietors would add a quantity of tobacco and some poisonous drugs. The vile liquid was sold to thirsty customers at enormous prices." The customers rarely objected, Root added; they were satisfied if a drink had "even a faint smell of liquor about it."

Fights among teamsters were frequent, for a job that required controlling and inspiring oxen made a man strong and stubborn. Unlike other frontier folk, however, bullwhackers usually battled not with knives or pistols but with their own powerful fists.

And just as fists were a bullwhacker's weapon, his bullwhip was his badge. Men fashioned their whips to their tastes, with stocks of hickory or ash or pecan, one and a half to three feet long. The lash might be as short



Under a bull-hacker's sharp eye, an extra-long team of 30 oxen fords Vetriska's muddy-bottomed Nohra River with a wagonload of timber. Added brute strength recruited from teams of wagons still on dry land / year / increased pulling power, reducing the chance of a mud-down crossing.



Wagons loaded with pipes and mining gear pause at a High Sierra way station for mule-feeding. Though fodder took up valuable cargo space, the fact that mules were faster than oxen helped to offset the cost.



One of the few female freighters, a South Dakotan known as Madame Canutson rose from herder and bullwhacker to ox-team owner in the 1880s. In skirts here, on the trail she dressed—and swore—like a man.



was too dry or too wet, too cold or too hot. When the sun burned down, the teamsters walked for miles in clouds of their own dust; even with kerchiefs wrapped around their faces, many suffered lasting damage to their eyes and noses and throats. Alkali dust burned even more than regular dust. Buffalo gnats almost too small to see worked their way into men's ears. Rattlesnakes, abundant on the prairie, lurked to bite both man and beast. Ticks infected oxen with Texas fever; disease and exhaustion made the life expectancy of an ox on the job a single freighting season.

When rain relieved the dryness, the heavy wagons sometimes sank so deep in mud that three teams—18 pairs of oxen—had to be used to pull each wagon free. After one such episode the men driving the teams were near exhaustion, and somebody discovered that one wagon was carrying a load of beer. With that, a man who was along reported, the trip went easier; his companions emptied several kegs before arriving at their des-

tination, and the saloonkeeper to whom the beer was consigned let them pay for it at cost—\$13.

In storms, which broke with awesome speed, lightning could kill men and animals, and huge hailstones often pelted those who escaped with their lives. Josiah Gregg, one of the rare teamsters who kept a diary, recalled one frightening day: "We were encamped at noon, when a murky cloud issued from behind the mountains, and, after hovering over us for a few minutes, gave vent to one of those tremendous peals of thunder. A sulphurous stench filled the atmosphere; but the thunderbolt had skipped over the wagons and lighted upon the *caballada* (the herd), which was grazing hard by. It was not a little singular to find an ox lying lifeless from the stroke, while his mate stood uninjured by his side, and under the same yoke."

Haphazard sanitation on the trail posed its own dangers. Majors' autobiography recorded that cholera struck several of the first wagon trains the partners sent out



## Some luckless challengers of the mule and ox



Asian camels pick their way across the Nevada desert, with silver miners in the role of camel drivers. Most Westerners loathed the animals.

Despite the proven merits of wagons drawn by mules or oxen, imaginative freight men were ever on the lookout for faster, cheaper or more reliable means of transport. Attempts to achieve this goal sometimes adorned the Western landscape with sights as strange as any a frontiersman could hope—or care—to see.

Caravans of camels were one such novelty. Though not native to the United States, the camel—as any Bible-reading American knew—was a certified beast of burden. In 1855 Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, whose responsibilities included all military freighting, cajoled an appropri-

ation out of Congress and directed that camels be acquired for tests as pack animals. Navy ships duly put in at Alexandria, Constantinople and ports farther east, picked up the bizarre creatures and eventually disembarked 34 of them in Texas.

Their first field trials, on a caravan across the southwestern desert to California, were judged extremely promising. The camels ignored rattlesnake bites, traveled for days without drinking water, subsisted on sagebrush, thistles and creosote bushes, which mules would not touch, and overcame the Army's biggest worry when they willingly swam across rivers. Further-

more, their cargo capacity was stunning: one camel managed a load of 1,256 pounds. The officer in charge of the experiment, Lieutenant Edward Beale, concluded that a camel did the work of four good mules.

Hearing of the results, a California newspaperman optimistically predicted that a "lightning dromedary express" would deliver mail from Missouri River towns in as little as 15 days. Private enterprise soon latched onto what appeared to be a good thing. In 1860 the American Camel Company, Incorporated, began running caravans of Asian camels—better inured to cold weather than the

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Arabian variety—around the silver mines of Virginia City, Nevada.

But within a few years the camel boomlet burst. The Civil War suspended official Washington's interest in the subject, especially since the camel project was linked in Northern minds to Jefferson Davis, who had become President of the Confederacy. Nor had the camels' personal habits endeared them to people—least of all the teamsters who were asked to drive or ride them. Camels were prodigious spitters; they also sneezed and vomited in remarkable volume; and they tended to attack strangers with snapping teeth. Dogs barked hysterically whenever they appeared, and oxen and mules sometimes stampeded at the sight of them.

Dismayed by such traits, camel-freight operators finally turned the animals loose to fend for themselves. They survived on U.S. soil for more than half a century, the last of them doing duty as circus attractions and

mounts at resort hotels for Southwesterners with exotic tastes.

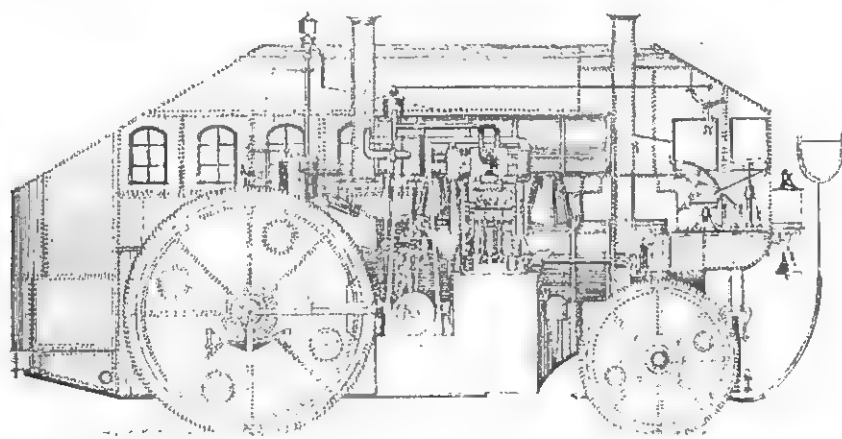
Ill fortune also befell a freighting scheme thought up in 1853 by a Nebraska entrepreneur whose name is recorded in history as "Windwagon" Thomas. Deciding that the freighting business could dispense with draft animals of any kind, Thomas rigged a 20-foot mast over a wagon, then raised a billowing sail and tried to prove that prairie breezes provided power enough to tow an entire wagon train. Before any wagons could be hitched to the lead vehicle, a wind blew it, like a child's kite, to splintery wreckage at the bottom of a ditch.

Other inventors believed that technology, not nature, held the answer to more efficient freighting. In 1861 the propitiously named Thomas L. Fortune of Mount Pleasant, Kansas, constructed a cross-country steam engine designed to pull 25 loaded freight wagons. His 60-horsepower trackless locomotive rode on wheels eight

feet high and weighed 10 tons. The great engine was rolled out of its shed on the Fourth of July. Since it was not sufficiently maneuverable to negotiate a street corner, it had to be backed out of town for its trial run. The engine bogged down in a mud-hole, embarrassingly failed to develop a head of steam strong enough to extricate itself and never pulled a wagon.

Meanwhile, other steam engines were being designed and tested by such would-be industrial giants as the Overland Traction Engine Company. An observer reported of one engine, "Those who looked upon the somewhat cumbersome and uncouth monster, with its complication of cylinders, and pulleys, and pipes, and wheels, pronounced it, in advance, an utter abortion." Events confirmed this harsh judgment: one of the most promising of the monsters threw a piston rod on its maiden voyage, was abandoned where it stood, and in time found ignominious service as a chicken coop.

## OVERLAND TRACTION ENGINE CO.



### LONGITUDINAL VIEW OF ENGINE UNCOVERED.

When this steam driven "prairie motor" was touted as the perfect replacement for draft animals, people scoffed, jeered and were soon proved right.

the mission of a man  
of Orem. She is survived by  
because we are confused, admit, lacking  
sense of direction."  
"Hey, that's happened to you, to  
with me, it's on Friday nights when I st  
tar work. I lost weeks. I was as good as

Mule-drawn wagons bring supplies to rail-  
road workers extending the Union Pacific's  
tracks westward through Utah in 1869.  
Ironically, completion of the transcontin-  
ental line ended the heyday of the wagon men.



Gordon's wagon train was ox-drawn, but his brother's was drawn by horses — always a temptation to Indians. "As they were nearing the agency," Garrett wrote, "John Gordon stopped his train for the horse teams to pass. Just as they were passing, the Indians jumped them. George Gordon and all his teamsters were killed. John Gordon and one bullwhacker escaped."

Most wagon trains got through safely to their destinations. The terminus of a trip might be Santa Fe, or Denver, or Salt Lake City, or Helena, or a lonely town with only one street, or a fort, or an Indian agency. Wherever it was, the squeak of the wagon wheels heralded the train's coming, for the bullwhackers had by then exhausted their axle grease; some townsfolk insisted that even before they could hear or see the wagons they could detect the train's approach — if the wind was right — by the scent of scores of sweat-covered oxen. Cattle bawling, drivers cracking their whips to impress onlookers, the train would pull to a halt. Amid still

more sound and fury, the stock would be pastured and the freight unloaded.

What typically happened next was recorded by a girl named Marian Russell. In 1852 Marian and her mother somehow managed to wangle a trip to Santa Fe by freight caravan, though passengers were rarely taken along. "As soon as our freight was delivered at the customs house," she recalled, "our drivers began eagerly to sign up and draw their wages. They washed their faces and combed their hair. There was a great hunting for clean shirts and handkerchiefs — a *baile* was forming." The dancing at the ball lasted into the wee hours. One bullwhacker recalled that during his four days in Santa Fe he and his fellows tripped the light fantastic every night. "Those Mexican girls were not such good lookers when seen on the street," he said, "but they were dolls when rigged out in the dancing costumes." Jesse Brown, who bullwhacked from Nebraska City to Fort Laramie and Fort Reno and back — a mission prolonged



On the West's most grueling freight run, a so-called 20-mule-team rig hauls 45,000 pounds of borax—a salt used as a cleansing agent—from a Death Valley lake bed across scorching California desert to a railhead. Such teams had in fact only 18 mules plus two strong horses as wheelers.



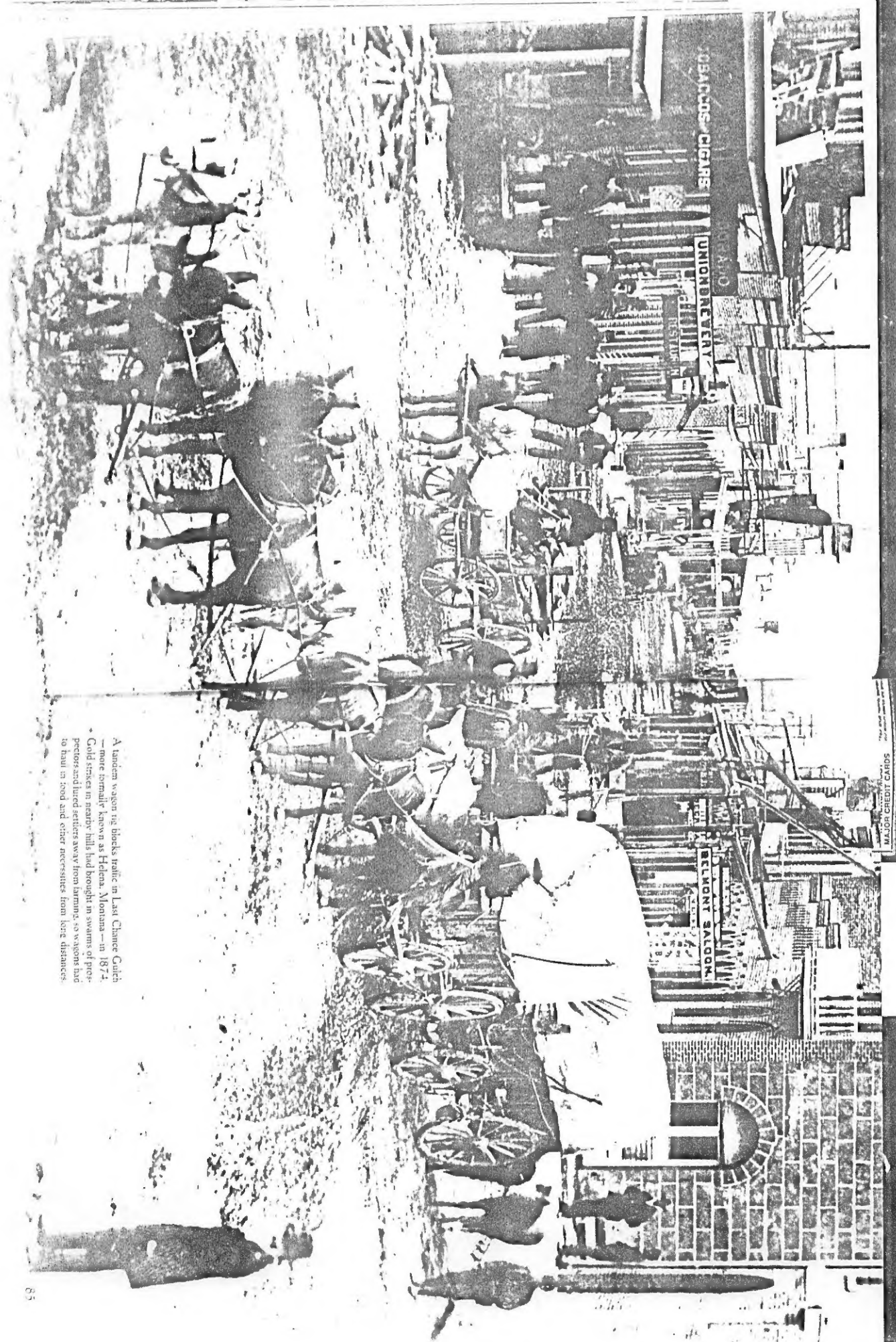
M. Salung, Jr., Orem;  
King, Victor, Idaho;

She is survived by  
daughters, William  
Junction, Ore.; Chae  
Diego, Calif.; Ronald  
Grove; Leland E.  
Street, Mrs. Kennet  
American Fork, Th



Montana's Overland Freight Line used an earlier owner's diamond-R brand on wagons, stock, and even a portrait of new owners (*from left*) C. A. Broadwater, Matt Carroll, E. G. Maclay and George Steele.





A tandem wagon tie blocks traffic in Last Chance Gulch — more formally known as Helena, Montana — in 1874. Gold strikes in nearby hills had brought in swarms of prospectors and lured settlers away from farming, so wagons had to haul in food and other necessities from large distances.